

# **THE MYTHO-RELIGIOUS VISION OF THORNTON WILDER**

**A THESIS  
SUBMITTED FOR THE AWARD OF THE DEGREE OF  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY  
IN  
ENGLISH**

**By**

**Arvind Kumar Mishra  
M.A.**

**Under**

**Supervisor  
Dr. R.K. Misra  
M.A. (Phil. & Eng.)  
Ph.D., D. Litt.  
Former Reader in English  
D.B.S. College  
Kanpur**

**Co-Supervisor  
Dr. Mahendra Singh  
M.A., Ph.D.  
Former Reader and Head  
Dept. of English, J.N. College Banda**



**To**

**Bundelkhand University Jhansi  
2007**

# **D.B.S. (POST GRADUATE) College, Kanpur**

R.K. Mishra

**M.A., Ph.D., D.Litt.  
Reader (Retd.)  
Department of English**

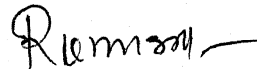
**Res: 553, Ratan Lal Nagar  
Kanpur  
Phone: 0512-2280545**

## **Certificate**

This is to certify that the thesis entitled "The Mytho-Religious Vision of Thornton Wilder" submitted by Mr. Arvind Kumar Mishra for the award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy to Bundelkhand University, Jhansi, is a record of bonafide research work carried out by him under our supervision and guidance. He has put in the required attendance of more than two hundred days in connection with the present research work. The results embodied in the thesis have not been submitted to any other University or Institute for the award of any degree.



**Dr. Mahendra Singh  
Co-Supervisor**



**Dr. R.K. Misra  
Supervisor**

**August 2007**



# CONTENTS

	Acknowledgement	i
	Preface	ii-vi
1	Introduction	1 - 37
2	A Note towards Wilder's Mytho-Religious Vision	38 - 67
3.	Mytho-Religious Vision in the Plays of Thornton Wilder	68 - 106
4.	Mytho-Religious Vision in the Novels of Thornton Wilder	107 - 144
5.	Wilder's Mytho-Religious Vision in his later Novels	145 - 177
6.	Wilder's Technical Innovations to unfold his Mytho-Religious Vision	178 - 204
7	Conclusion	205 - 214
	Bibliography	215- 219

## Acknowledgement

The present research work is a saga of events from its conception to completion. I have no hesitation to acknowledge that the work would have not been possible without the inspiration and guidance of my supervisor Dr. R.K. Misra and Co-supervisor Dr. Mahendra Singh. I would like to express my gratitude to Mrs. Shobha Misra, wife of Dr. Misra and Dr. (Mrs.) Krishna Thakur, wife of Dr. Singh for their hospitality and encouragement.

I am also thankful to Mr. Rajeshwar Misra, Librarian, Central Library, I.I.T. Kanpur and P. Singh also of I.I.T. Kanpur, for their help in the collection of research material. I extend my thanks to Dr. R.N. Awasthi, Principal, D.S.N. College, Unnao and Dr. O.P. Dixit, Ex-Head, Department of English, D.S.N. College, Unnao. I express my gratitude to Dr. K.K. Awasthi as well, for his help and inspiration. I am also indebted to Prof. Pramod Mai Sairaha, Head, Department of English, Pt. J.N. College, Banda for his constant cooperation. I am highly thankful to the Principal, Dr. N.D. Samadhia, the Librarian and the staff of D.V. College, Orai, for providing me all possible facilities. I am also grateful to the Librarian and the staff of A.S.R.C. Hyderabad and The American Centre, Delhi for helping me in the course of my research work. Thanks are also due to Mr. J.P. Sharma for the flawless typing of the manuscript. At this occasion I express my gratitude to my parents, Shri Rajendra Prasad Mishra, and Smt. Shanti Misra, to my brothers and sisters-in-law for their affection and inspiration. I especially thank all the members of my family, friends, and relatives who have always inspired me and have always given me a helping hand whenever necessary.

In the end I would like to thank my wife Smt. Anshu Mishra and my daughter Pari who shared with me the ecstasies and agonies of a research work.

*Arvind Kumar Mishra*

August 2007

Arvind Kumar Mishra

## Preface

Thornton Wilder, the proud winner of the prestigious Pulitzer Prize on three separate occasions, was "a major figure" in the literary and cultural life of twentieth century America. Together with O' Neill, Miller, and Williams he was considered as one of the "Big Four" among the modern American writers. As a dramatist, novelist, essayist, and script-writer, he promoted American values, Christian morality, community, and the family and stood for the simple pleasures of life. Though a traditionalist in his vision, he was a tireless innovator in the field of dramatic art as well as storytelling.

However, most of the scholars do not fully appreciate the key-note of his message and the nature and the meaning of the mytho-religious character of his vision. As a writer, Wilder had a mission and a message. Like T.S. Eliot, he wanted to restore ancient values in a world which was virtually blind to its spiritual needs. He wanted to restore man's spiritual view of the world enabling him to visualize the sacred in the common and ordinary things of life.

For the fulfillment of his mission and for delivering his message, Wilder used literature. He had tremendous faith in its power. For him literature was the most powerful vehicle of spirituality. It was the best instrument of preserving the sacred in the common and the ordinary things of life. For fully exploiting the power of literature, Wilder attempted to develop a religious rhetoric capable of renewing the spiritual energy of his readers. In his attempt to revive spiritual values and developing a fiction to revitalize Christian myths,

he aligned himself with such authors as T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and James Joyce.

Wilder wove the pattern of his vision with the threads drawn from different sources. Christian myths were perhaps his most important source. Then there were other sources such as Genesis, Spinoza, Plato, and Aristotle. Among his Americans his sources included Melville, Thoreau, and Dickinson. Among the ancient writers Thornton was attracted by Terence and among modern writers, he acknowledged the debt of Proust and Henry James. His other sources included the Bible and Gandhi.

The central point of Wilder's vision was undoubtedly religion. But his conception of religion was different from others. The religion which Wilder favoured was a non-sectarian religion, which people could accept without reservations and without questioning. By and large such a religion could be only humanistic sharing the modern values of Christian humanism. In his humanistic religion Wilder incorporated ethical subjectivism of Satre and the mystical existentialism of Kierkegaard, and Berdyaev, emphasizing individual's responsibility for his moral choice. Besides, Wilder avoids the narcissus assumptions underlying the existentialist philosophy.

In fact Wilder's religion cannot be defined in precise terms. But for its insistence on love controlled by reason, it can be labelled as personalism. Furthermore, Wilder's mytho-religious vision was not circumscribed by merely mythic assumptions but also addressed itself to the modern problems which agitated human consciousness.

Wilder's preoccupation with the mythic nature of life and his belief that life would continue to renew itself, distinguished him from more realistic twentieth century writers. It led him to develop what he called, "planetary consciousness" which enabled him to keep a balance between the individual and the universal or the American and the cosmopolitan man.

Wilder's mytho-religious vision can be divided into two parts, the earlier and the later. While his earlier vision embodied the humanistic, religious, and ethical values of ancient and modern traditions, as well as the ideas of his American predecessors and the contemporary creative writers, his later vision is sustained chiefly by Gertrude Stein and the existentialists like Kierkegaard, Sartre, and Berdyaev. Wilder examines the relevance of their ideas, in purely modern context, or to be precise, American context. In order to project these ideas, he took recourse to ancient myths, allegories, parables, and fables. The researcher undertakes a thorough investigation of Wilder's attempt to arrive at his vision, analyzing and evaluating the formative forces, including influences and the process of its development. However, the study is only exploration. It has all the defects from which the study of a foreign author by an Indian student is bound to suffer. Nevertheless, it is a sincere effort to evaluate the mytho-religious vision of a man who celebrated his country. In the end, the researcher expresses his sense of gratitude to all the scholars whose ideas and even phrases, he consciously or unconsciously borrowed or used.

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

Thornton Wilder, the proud winner of the prestigious Pulitzer Prize on three separate occasions, was a "major figure" in the literary and cultural life of twentieth century America. Together with O' Neill, Miller, and Williams, he was considered as one of the "Big Four" among the modern American writers. As a man of multifarious interests, he gave expression to the multidimensional American consciousness through his plays, fiction, essays, and scripts. Wilder has a rare capacity to transcend the spatio-temporal limits and to assume a cosmopolitan stance for delineating perennial human values. In his works, he inculcated a mytho-religious vision and innovated dramatic techniques and the art of story-telling. Through his creative writing, Wilder set his massive weight to arrest atheistic tendencies and to recover ancient values of humanism and Christianity.

The claim that Wilder was a man of multifarious interests is a little controversial. Indeed the American scene, which Thornton Wilder portrayed in his works, was multidimensional. It embodied a varied experience of pluralistic societies, its social and ideological interaction, its immense variety of influences, and above all its astounding variety of forms. The American literary experience of twentieth century produced more Nobel Laureates than that of any other country.

As for the social forces, operating in American society, we find that they caused great social, political, and economic upheavals including, "the two world wars, the spread of Communism and the rise and fall of Fascism, and such localized or national events as the great Dust Bowl disaster to Mid-West agriculture, the Great Depression of the thirties, and the Prohibition experiment of the twenties. The increasing urbanization and the concentration of population in suburban areas, the advent of the automobile, the radio, the moving picture theaters, and the electrification of rural America have been factors modifying the social, cultural, and literary life of the nation. Important for its influence upon writers and the reading public has been the developing interest in psychology, especially the channels emanating from Freud and Jung, the sociological studies of environmental influences upon the development of personality, and the concept of causality developed in the physical sciences."<sup>1</sup>

Many of these social upheavals were caused by phenomenal growth of science and its daughter technology, which brought an unprecedented growth in the post Civil-War America. This growth effected widespread transformation in the national scene of the country, including the literary scene. However, more important were the new ideas, produced by sciences, natural as well as social. The new ideas produced a new world vision, redefining man's view of himself and his world. These ideas compelled man to realize that the earth is not the centre of this universe. Likewise, man does not occupy central position in the creation. While the researches in astronomy expanded man's universe, they at the same time diminished his status. Much in the same way the

investigations in the field of Biology, reduced the dignity of man by underscoring his animal ancestry. New ideas in Psychology, went on to discover a new nature of soul, whereas those in Philosophy tended to redefine human condition in terms of existence. As for the external reality, the Physicists developed a four dimensional conception of reality. Similarly, the Environmentalists made current the interdependence and interconnection of the natural phenomena.

Coming to the individual scientists, the most important ideas were those of Charles Darwin, embodied in his epoch-making books, The Decent of Man and The Origin of Species. Darwin knocked down the age-old belief of man's divine ancestry and attempted to prove that he (man) was the product of an ongoing process of evolution. His evolutionism went on to change radically man's ways of thought and behaviour. Penetrating in every area of experience, it wrought tremendous changes and brought several new theories to the fore. Darwin's phrases like, "the struggle for existence," "the survival of the fittest," and "the human beast" seized human imagination. Besides, his theories made unprecedented impact in religious, social, economic, political, and literary realms.

In religion, Darwin's evolutionism went on to put a question mark over the hitherto accepted belief that universe was the creation of God. It emphasized that it (the universe) underwent a constant changing process. Significantly the great English biologist promoted material values, at the cost of spiritual and religious ones. As Foster R. Dulles points out, Darwin's theory of



evolution, "struck a hard blow at conventional religious ideas and called for an, entirely new interpretation of the Biblical story."<sup>2</sup>

The theory of evolution made even a greater impact in social realm. Some eminent sociologists developed the concept of social Darwinism, which interpreted society and social institutions, in terms of evolution. Herbert Spencer, Darwin's co-worker, while developing the theory of "the survival of the fittest," interpreted Darwinism in social terms. James J. Hill, the rail-baron asserted that the fortunes of railroad companies are determined by the law of "the survival of the fittest." John D. Rockefeller, the business magnate, while addressing a Sunday school class said: "The growth of a large business is merely a survival of the fittest... the American Beauty rose can be produced in the splendour and fragrance which bring clear to its beholder only by sacrificing the early buds which grow up around it. This is not an evil tendency in business. It is merely working out of a law of nature and a law of God."<sup>3</sup>

Darwinian evolutionism, infiltrated in politics as well, influencing the central notions of polity including the interpretation of war. Many capitalists believed that the struggle for existence and war were factors necessary to human life in the process of elimination of weaker species. David F. Bowers states that, "the Darwinism interpretation of war as another instance of the ever present struggle for existence seemed to provide overwhelming confirmation and was readily accepted in this spirit."<sup>4</sup>

Obviously, the evolutionary theory of Darwin made a far reaching impact on American literature, especially Naturalism. It produced writers, like Hamlin

Garland, Theodore, Dreiser, Jack London, Stephen Crane, Frank Norris et al. From the writings of Garland we can get a fair idea, how the followers of Darwin went on to become an important formative force in shaping the American literary mentality, especially during the first quarter of twentieth century. He wrote, "I read both day and night, grappling with Darwin, Spencer, Fiske, Helmholtz, Haeckel, – all the mighty masters of evolution whose books I had not hitherto been able to open... Herbert Spencer remained my philosopher and masters. With eager haste I sought to compass the 'Synthetic Philosophy.' The Universe took on order and harmony... It was thrilling, it was joyful to perceive that everything moved from the simple to the complex – how the bowstring became the harp, and the egg the chicken. My mental diaphragm creaked with pressure of increasing idea, my brain young, sensitive to every touch, took hold of facts and theories like a phonographic cylinder, and while my body softened and my muscles wasted from disuse, I skittered from pole to pole of the intellectual universe like an impatient bat."<sup>5</sup>

The influence of Einstein's theory of Relativity is no less important in moulding contemporary consciousness. The theory highlights not only the spatio-temporal conception of reality but at the same time also discards the notions of continuity, solidity, and causality in nature. It does away with the old concept of matter and the distinction between time and place, paving the way for a new conception of time. Einstein's theories were followed by the discoveries of Bohr, Rutherford, Planck, Heisenberg, Maxwell, Faraday and

many others whose theories went a long way to change the conception of external reality.

Meanwhile, the researches in Psychology changed the conception of inner reality as a fluid substance which was diametrically opposed to the old view of inner reality i.e. soul as a spiritual substance. William James defined psyche or soul as a stream of thought or consciousness. Influenced by Darwin's world view, Freud conceived of psyche in terms of the Conscious and Unconscious and highlighted the centrality of the latter. Going a step further, his disciple, Jung divided the Unconscious in two parts, the individual and racial and highlighted the importance of the latter as the source of human action. Another follower of Freud, Adler underlined the role of neurosis in the development of the human personality. Meanwhile time-philosophers, like Bergson, Proust, Higdon et al. developed new conceptions of time and its different patterns. If psychologists gave a new view of inner reality of human nature, the twentieth century philosophers, especially the Existentialists shaped a new notion of human condition in terms of alienation, estrangement, isolation, emptiness etc. These thinkers offered their own conceptions of human life and its predicaments. Likewise, anthropologists threw a new light on the role of old myths in moulding contemporary consciousness. It was Jung, who emphasized the role of myth, religion, and art in human life. His conception on myth was supported by anthropologists especially, Frazer whose monumental work The Golden Bough became the most seminal work for the modern poets and novelists.

The social and the ideological upheavals provided a tremendous impetus to the American literary consciousness. It produced a rich literature of great variety, which reflected different moods of the States. The literature of the period from 1910 to 1920 sometimes called the "teens" reflected the teen-age-adolescence of the American consciousness. It charted the development of a nation and the changes in its social patterns as well as its efforts to burst out of relatively provincial life into a larger cosmopolitan world. The literature of the 1920's exemplified the mood of "the waste land" or of "the lost generation," describing the complexities of life, faced by the post-war generations.

The literature of American adolescence demonstrated a regional character with each and every region of the country, producing great writers, who gave vent to the regional and racial sentiments. Conscious of the difference of region, race, and religion, many writers articulated the spirit of racial assimilation. Many of them pin-pointed the force, which supported reconciliatory tendencies and the forces, which opposed it. Bringing out the spirit of racial assimilation, uniformity, and self-conscious, self-criticism, Dr. Oliver writes, "The immensity of the American geography has meant that our literature has developed in part along lines – very loosely indicated, to be sure of regional patterns. We have had Southern writers, New England writers, Western and Mid-Western writers. We have had urban writers and writers of prairie or mountain life. The hybrid nature of our racial heritage has been a pronounced factor in our cultural life and in our literature. We have had a literature of the American Indian, the Negro, the Jew; we have had the problem

of racial assimilation as a basis for literature and we have had opposition to assimilation in our literature. Forces tending toward a uniformity in the country, such as transcontinental railroads and highways, the mobility given by the automobile, national coverage by radio, television, press associations, magazines and advertising campaigns, have encountered the opposition of those advocates of the local and unique cultural values to be found in isolated pockets with dialectical variations and quaint folkways. Thus a continuous critical assessment of factors in American culture has given American literature a self-conscious self-criticism.”<sup>6</sup>

A self-conscious criticism, which actually started in the last decade of the nineteenth century was reinforced in the twentieth century. The prominent older writers, like William Dean Howells, Henry James, and Mark Twain, were joined by many promising younger writers. The vigour of literary activity surfaced in the Americanization of foreign literary movements and lively debates over them. Many writers were engaged in the critical battle over romanticism, realism, and naturalism. “Both Howells and James engaged in the critical debate; and they were joined by Hamlin Garland, then living in Chicago, Frank Norris, living in San Francisco, and various other spokesmen for divergent literary methods.”<sup>7</sup>

To begin with, since romanticism was firmly established in American realm of literature, it was extremely difficult to uproot it easily. American writers and middle class readers were not the least inclined to get rid of the established conventions of romantic idealism. However, the war-time

experience made people realize the stark realities of life. As a result, the forces of realism began to take roots and to threaten romanticism and its central core Emersonian idealism. Subsequently, a battle ensued between the exponents of idealism and those of realism in American literary world. George Pellow spoke of this intellectual battle in these words, "For a long time a wordy war has raged in the magazine and the newspapers between the so-called realists and romanticists. In 'Harper's Monthly' Mr. Howells has for years been asserting the importance of novels that keep close to the facts of life; and the critics and criticasters have daily attacked his teaching and practice as materialistic and debasing, as disregarding the depth, variety, and beauty of life."<sup>8</sup>

Nevertheless, an attempt was made to reconcile romanticism with realism. It was initiated by the 'local colour movement' which dominated the literary scene of the last quarter of the nineteenth century. The movement, writes Percy H. Boynton, "started with a fresh and vivid treatment of native American material, and it moved in a great sweeping curve from the west down past the Gulf, up through the southern east states into New England, across to the Middle West, and back into the Ohio Valley until every part of the country was represented by its exposition."<sup>9</sup>

The growing influence of realism also surfaced in folk expressions contained in regional songs and poems, describing common human experience of the life of plains, lumber camps, mining community, and railroad workers. Their folk expressions were best reflected in famous comedies, like Artemus Ward, Petroleum Vesuvius Nasby, and Josh Billings. To quote, Billings: "There

may cum a time when the Lion and the Lam will lie down together – I shall be as glad to see it as any body – but I am still betting on the Lion.”<sup>10</sup>

Howells, the leader of realism in America, sounded a new note in American realism. Influenced by Tolstoy, Turgenev, and the French realists, he came to believe that literature should look to the work-worn, care-worn, brave kindly face of the everyday world rather than, “the romantic, the bizarre, the heroic.”<sup>11</sup> He held that, “[r]ealism is nothing more and nothing less than the truthful treatment of material.”<sup>12</sup> The only requirement of realism was truthfulness. To be true to life was the first principle of realism, “I confess,” writes Howells, “that I do not care to judge any work of the imagination without first of all applying this test to it. We must ask ourselves before we ask anything else. Is it true? True to the motives, the impulses, the principles that shape the life of actual men and women.”<sup>13</sup>

Howells’ interest was, as Alfred Kazin summarized, “In the domesticities of society, homely scenes and values, people meeting on trains, ships, and at summer hotels... friendly dinners, the furrows of homespun character, housekeeping as a principle of existence... Howells had therefore no reason to think of realism as other than simplicity, Americanism, and truth.”<sup>14</sup>

With the advent of Darwin, realism has another incarnation in the form of naturalism, which became a literary movement of great promise and importance. Bringing modifications in the gentler realism of the preceding age and imbibing the ideas of Darwin, it adopted the method of scientific objectivity in the treatment of the natural man. It went on to emphasize the

overpowering aspects of man's environment or his passions and instincts. Philosophically Naturalism was inclined towards determinism, which viewed man and questioned the principle of free will.

Besides the romantists, realists, and naturalists, there was yet another group of writers, which followed a different line. Outgrowing from regional compulsions, they assumed a cosmopolitan instance. Many of these writers lived away from the States and imbibed the literary culture of many other traditions. These writers, included Gertrude Stein, Ezra Pound, and Eliot. Stein, "had been a psychology student under William James at Harvard and also a medical student at Johns Hopkins University, but her life in France as an unconventional writer became a rallying point for many young writers and her influence upon her country's literature is significant and extensive."<sup>15</sup> In Harvard University, these were George Santayana, Josiah Royce, and George Herbert Palmer who inculcated a new philosophical vision. There were also Irving Babbitt and Paul Elmer who promoted the study of Sanskrit and Oriental literatures. Both of them were instrumental in producing New Humanism.

All the four movements, combined to produce a rich harvest of American literature. In poetry, there were Carl Sandburg, Vachel Lindsay, Robert Frost, Ezra Pound, and T.S. Eliot. Pound was important in as much as he encouraged interest in foreign literatures, especially those of China, Japan, Greece, and Rome. Meanwhile, Eliot aspired to revive Catholicism and ancient myths. Much in the same way, drama and novel were also energized by a new spirit and produced writers of great promise. While drama produced, Eugene O'



Neill, Thornton Wilder, Elmer Rice, Laurence Stallings, and Sidney Howard, novel had to its credit such great writers as Dreiser, Henry James, Edith Wharton, Ellen Glasgow, Dorothy Canfield, Willa Cather, Sherwood, Anderson, Sinclair Lewis, Hemingway, William Faulkner, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Thornton Wilder, Dohn Dos Passos, and Thomas Wolf.

Interestingly, Thornton Wilder occupied the central position in both forms of literature, novel, and drama. He made his name in both the fields and went on to receive America's greatest literary award, the Pulitzer Prize for novel as well as for drama. Remarkably, he was the only author to accomplish this feat. Indeed, Wilder was a versatile personality, a man of many parts, capable of expressing himself in different modes of radically different nature with equal felicity. He wrote and acted in collage dramatics and was a member o the Pundits and of the Elizabethan Club. Thornton was a great conversationalist as well. His versatility made him a man of many parts and an artist, who gave expression not only to the totality of American experience but also to the best elements of the world's cultural heritage. Though from the literary point of view, he represented only the one aspect of American consciousness, the Religious Humanism, he did not overlook the issues, raised by Romanticism, Realism, and Naturalism.

The allegation that Wilder as the follower of the nineteenth century Genteel Tradition of correctness and conventionality, turned a deaf ear to the stark realities of the contemporary life can hardly be maintained. Martin Gardiner in University of Kansas City Review observes that Wilder's work

painted no picture of slaughter houses, tenements, or oppressed minorities, often the material of modern realism. Although Wilder tends to be oblivious of the surface realities, he is quite attentive to the realities of human condition of the contemporary world of science. His awareness of human predicament is evident from his foreword to The Angel That Troubled the Waters. He writes that in this world, the individual felt himself, "shrinking to nullity in the immensity of the universe as revealed by science, in which the individual's very existence is threatened by means of destruction he himself has created."<sup>16</sup>

There are critics, who regard Wilder as a realistic novelist. Michael J. Vivion is quite impressed with his realistic approach. "Although the works," Vivion writes, "do not specifically detail life's unpleasanties, they actually ignore few of its problems. The Cabala touches upon sexual obsession, incest, infidelity, the grubbirress of American intellectual and moral materialism, suicide, and the failure of Puritanism. The Bridge of San Luis Rey deals directly with death and religion, while The Woman of Andros is populated by the disfigured, the crass moneymaker, and the morally and spiritually corrupt. The Skin of Our Teeth stages man's cyclic struggle to survive his own mistakes. As these examples show, Wilder's subject matter places him closer to the realistic novelists than some critics have assumed."<sup>17</sup>

The versatility of Thornton was the product of his religious and literary background, education in different countries, his travels abroad, his literary company, and teaching stints. He was born in Madison, Wisconsin, on April 17, 1897. His father, Amos Parker Wilder, editor and publisher of the newspaper

(Wisconsin State Journal) was a very religious Congregationalist, and his mother Isabella Thornton (Niven) Wilder, the daughter of a Presbyterian minister was a cultivated woman. Both of them were destined to influence the mind of their child. It was actually the influence of his mother which inspired his creative mind. Underlining the influence of mother on Wilder David Castronovo writes, "The home-minus Papa – was now dominated by Mrs. Wilder and her love of European culture and art. Thornton discovered modern writers like Proust and Mann, became an avid theatergoer, and shared his ardors with a mother whom he referred to as 'Our Lady of Florence.'"18

Linda Simon points out that Thornton's life with his mother was "more congenial" than it has been with his father. His association with mother yielded him rich dividend. She was instrumental in the development of the creative faculty of his talented son. To quote Linda, "There seemed to be a special affinity between Mrs. Wilder and Thornton 'Our mother had the same kind of excited, enthusiastic curiosity about not only being alive and what the world held, but especially music and art, for all that could be learned and seen in Europe and for languages and especially poetry,' Isabel remembered later. Even as a young child, Thornton was busily writing plays for his brother and sisters, and their mother provided yards of cheesecloth for draped costumes."19

His elder brother Amos N. Wilder also influenced him. Born in 1895, Amos was to become a distinguished professor of Theology at Harvard University. He wrote on the spiritual aspects of contemporary literature. Thornton had three sisters, Charlotte, Isabel, Janet and a twin, who died at birth.

One of his sisters Isabel became his companion in literary pursuits. She gave up her own promising career as a writer to become Thornton's confident and frequent travelling companion and to take charge of his voluminous correspondence.

Wilder's literary talents were eventually augmented by his rich and varied education. When he was nine, he was taken to China, where his father was American Consul-General at Hong Kong for six months. Later in the same year, he was sent to Berkeley, California for his schooling. In 1911, when Thornton returned to China, he went as a boarding pupil to an English Mission School at Chefoo for a year. After some shuffling back and forth he returned to the United States in 1912 and completed his education in Berkeley and Ojai, California, Oberlin College and Yale. He went to school first at Ojai, California, and then at the Berkeley High School from which he graduated in 1915. From 1915 to 1917, he attended Oberlin College, where he lost no time appearing as a writer in the Oberlin Literary Magazine. In 1917, he was transferred to Yale, his father's old college. Having found his vocation, young Wilder kept the Yale Literary Magazine and plentifully supplied it with his works.

In 1920, Wilder went to Rome to study Archaeology at the American Academy, where he spent two years (1920-21). While he joined the American Academy to study Archaeology, he absorbed European culture and gathered material for his first book The Cabala, a novel about a small group of spiritually exhausted Roman aristocrats and the two American students. After two years,

he came back to the States and started teaching French at Lawrenceville School in New Jersey. He remained at Lawrenceville School, and took an M.A. degree in French literature from Princeton in 1926.

Both, the school and college days played a formative role in the development of Thornton's physical as well as intellectual life. They went on to shape his mind, to develop his taste, and to promote his creative sensibility. For instance, the time which he spent at China Island Mission Boy's School, at Chefoo on the Yellow Sea, provided him with a sense of timelessness and antiquity which later became central to his aesthetic consciousness. Linda Simon writes, "More than the physical impressions that Thornton retained of the vast land were the aesthetic sensibilities that the culture evoked. He first confronted a sense of timelessness, of antiquity, which would forever influence him. And he sensed a profound linking of all things of nature, which he expressed many years later. There were only seven Chinese words he could remember, he said: 'one, two, three, four, chicken-egg-cake.' The metaphorical translation was, he decided, 'All nature is one.'"<sup>20</sup>

Thornton's experience at the Thacher School in Ojai, California, remarkable for its outdoor activities and rigorous physical programme was also seminal from the creative angle, since it had a curriculum which was instrumental in cultivating a rich intellectual life. It included in its subjects, Latin, Greek, French, and German; English grammar and literature; algebra, geometry, and trigonometry; physics, and chemistry; Greek, Roman, English, and American history; and debates. Thus the atmosphere of the school was

congenial to intellectual life. Interestingly, the school authorities made arrangement for evening readings of Scott, Dickens, Austen, James, Kipling, and Howells as also a lengthy reading from the Bible on Sunday. Besides, as Linda Simon states, the headmaster opened the school day at 8 O'clock each morning with an appropriate comment, "on morals and manners... followed... by the reading of some valuable poems, with so much comment and description as may insure appreciation. The idea was suggested by Goethe's assertion that no day should go by without the reading of a good poem."<sup>21</sup>

Likewise, Thornton's days at Berkeley High School which he attended with his sister, Charlotte were also important in as much as they provided him with a chance to know that his real talent lay more in acting and playwriting than in sports. The school also gave him a chance to display his creative powers. Furthermore, the country life also went on to inspire his writing. "His creative life," writes Simon, "continued beyond the walls of the high school. A walk in the country might inspire an idea, a plot, and of course an enticing title, for a major work. But when he returned home to try to write, his enthusiasm waned. Being an adolescent author was discouraging, he found. He had high hopes but could never realize his plans."<sup>22</sup>

Thornton's association with Oberlin College was important in the sense that it whetted his interest in arts and enabled him to study Greek literature. Rex Burbank states, that the atmosphere of the college was very congenial and inspiring for his creative and intellectual talents, "Despite his initial disappointment, he found Oberlin a stimulating place where his interests in

theatre, music, and classical literature were encouraged and where for the first time he found adults besides his mother who appreciated his growing creative talents and intellectual curiosity. He studied the Greek masterpieces and Virgil and Dante, in translation, in a course offered by 'the greatest lecturer I have ever heard.'"<sup>23</sup>

Oberlin also brought him in contact with two great professors, Charles H.A. Wager and William Hutchins. Wager in particular encouraged him to cultivate an artistic taste. He invited Thornton to read his plays and stories in his home. At the same time Hutchins became responsible for Thornton's religious ideas. Furthermore, "[t]he warm, humane atmosphere of Oberlin also nourished the growing gregariousness that was to become a notable part of his personality; and in that invigorating environment he began to publish some of his writings in the Oberlin Literary Magazine."<sup>24</sup>

Besides, Oberlin, Thornton's association with Lawrenceville School, Princeton was important. He worked in the school as a teacher of French, and also as assistant master of Davis House, where he came in touch with some important persons, including C. Leslie Glenn, a teacher of Mathematics whose ideas on religion went on to interest him. Thornton was particularly impressed by his views on the existence of God. Linda Simon writes how during a conversation, Glenn suddenly turned to him and said, "What we believers forget is that no one is happy without God, no one!"<sup>25</sup> Thornton's Lawrenceville experience was noted for his study and teaching of French language as well as

for his conviction that teaching was his true vocation. No wonder, that teaching always seemed to him the most authentic of his roles.

Much in the same way, Thornton's experience in Rome was crucial in the sense that it made him acquainted with some religious figures and promoted his literary interests. In Rome he, "uncovered not only past worlds, but a new, attractive and vibrant world of the present."<sup>26</sup> Thornton paid several visits to Adolfo de Bosis, a poet and translator of Shelley. He was much impressed by his wife who was a daughter of a Methodist Minister and their son Lauro, a nineteen-year-old Chemistry student at the University of Rome. Lauro, an idealistic youngman, with a love for poetry, literature as well as Philosophy was well aware of the implications of advances in science. However, Thornton was much more interested in the, "esoteric world in which he lived. It was this world which Thornton recorded in notebook after notebook, and which eventually would inspire a novel, The Cabala."<sup>27</sup>

Thornton's residence at the MacDowell Colony during 1925, was instrumental in providing him a rich company especially, that of Leonora Speyer, Composer, Mabel Daniels, dramatist Esther Bates, Padraic and Mary Colum, writer Nancy Byrd Turner, Elinor Wylie and William Benet, the newly divorced Tennessee (Mrs. Sherwood) Anderson, and Edwin Arlington Robinson. All these writers, helped Thornton in some way or the other, in finding himself as a writer, as well as formulating his themes and techniques. However, among them the most congenial writer was E.A. Robinson, the poet. Robinson had no rational philosophy, or a sense of society. He was responsive



only to a particular person or a particular experience, or a particular mode of expression. Nevertheless, he exerted a formative influence on Thornton. He, according to Linda Simon, "succeeded in convincing Thornton that a writer must never mix politics with art. The poet himself did not join groups of publishers and authors, would not take part in literary arguments. For him, life as a writer was sacred and had to be protected from distractions."<sup>28</sup>

Coming to the contemporary writers, Thornton was most impressed by Gertrude Stein. She influenced Thornton in many ways, including in the use of the American language, the conception of the Human Nature and the Human Mind, and in his craze about America. Thornton came in touch with Stein in 1934, at Chicago. She had come to America after spending many years in Paris. To Thornton's utter surprise even after a long stay abroad, "she had remained staunchly American in her idioms, attitudes, and old-fashioned Republican politics. Wilder, it seems, rediscovered his country by listening to an expatriate who did not feel at odds with the style of the American language and the nature of American national aspirations."<sup>29</sup>

Ever since Stein's lectureship at Chicago, the two writers became fast friends. Wilder's inborn conservative nature and gentlemanly manners, and Stein's touchy nature, became complementary to each other. Wilder, as a dutiful friend, read Stein's books with care and wrote prefaces to them. He was greatly fascinated by Gertrude's books as well as her conceptions of Human Nature and Human Mind. Commenting on The Geographical History of the United States, he wrote, "What a look. I mean what a book! I've been living

for a month with ever increasing intensity on the conceptions of Human Nature and the Human Mind and on the relations of Masterpieces to their apparent subject matter."<sup>30</sup> Interestingly, this distinction between Human Nature and the Human Mind became central to Wilder's creative sensibility. It enabled him to formulate his own sense of man's situation in the contemporary world. Interpreting Wilder's conception Castronovo writes, "Human Nature is a matter of identity, personality, and particularity. Wilder sought something beyond it, the Human Mind's capacity to escape time and the stamp of the self through art."<sup>31</sup>

Gertrude's influence enabled Thornton to rediscover his American identity. In 1935, he went to visit Stein and Alice B. Toklas in the Haute Savoie. During this visit, Thornton came to realize his American self. His reaction was a little startling, as he went on to write:

Crazy about America, and you did that to me... my country 'tis of thee, I always knew I loved it, but I never knew I loved it like this. Every Childs' Restaurant, every shoe blacking parlor. I don't feel as though I ever had to leave it again. I was born into the best country in the world. Gertrude told me so.<sup>32</sup>

Evidently, Thornton's education and travels, provided him with a rich experience, which shaped his intellectual life and energized his creative faculty. He imbibed a variety of ideas, including a sense of timelessness and antiquity. Besides, at a very young age, Thornton became acquainted with Latin, Greek, French, German, and English grammar as well as literature. Furthermore, it was during school days, that he began to evince a keen interest in such great

writers as Austen, Scott, Dickens, James, Kipling, and Howells. Likewise, during his travels, stay at various places, and teaching stint, Thornton came in close touch with some great teachers, such as Glenn, Wager and Hutchins as well like some great writers, like E.A. Robinson and Gertrude Stein who eventually went on to stimulate his creative life.

We can get an idea of Thornton's mind, including his ideas and impressions about literature, philosophy, and his artistic creed from the The Journals of Thornton Wilder 1939-1961. The book reveals, "[h]is wide-ranging scholarly interests – motifs in Palestrina, the dating of Lope de Vega's plays, the text of Finnegans Wake, the defining qualities of classic American authors, techniques in Dickens, Stendhal, Cervantes, Thorstein Veblen's failings as a thinker."<sup>33</sup> The document records Wilder's explorations of the works of contemporaries in America. It shows that as a playwright and novelist, he is equipped with a curiosity, which nobody can challenge. He unfolds the process by which Thornton, "enriched and transformed his own stage and fictional plans through the use of other writers' visions. Kafka, Kierkegaard, Genet, Sartre, the philosophers, Mann, Boccaccio, the Greeks, Zen Buddhism: his unflagging appetite for literature, art, and thought takes the form of a delight in deriving-typically, a passage about an author will tell about a motif that Wilder wanted for his own work."<sup>34</sup>

Though, Wilder as a conservative man of mysteriously evasive nature, discloses nothing about his personal and family life, he is quite candid about his literary pursuits, cultural obsessions, and philosophical ideas. The astounding

variety of experiences and influences goes on to make Thornton Wilder, a protean writer as well as a mixture of originality adaptation and fabrication. Interestingly, Castronovo visualizes him, "[a]n adapter of styles and assumer of disguises."<sup>35</sup> As a writer, Thornton belonged not to a particular locality or to a social climate. We find him restlessly moving from setting to setting. Since Wilder is a fabricator, he is unable to provide us a true picture of American or the European scene. Because of these limitations, he became an oddity or all alone in, "his hothouse craftsmanship, his conjured settings, and his bookish approach to creating characters and backgrounds."<sup>36</sup>

However, the real Thornton can be found neither in his fabricated stories nor in his adapted of styles but in his articulation of the spirit of his contemporary world, the spirit of isolation and chaos. According to Castronovo, "Wilder absorbed the spirit of his age and took his place as a distinguished supporting artist in the struggle to express the disorder and sense of disintegration that also haunted the late James, the young Hemingway, and the Eliot of 'Prufrock' and The Waste Land."<sup>37</sup> Wilder focussed his attention on the damaged selves and broken relationships. He was attentive to the people who were falling apart and perishing. He was concerned with the vulnerable men and women, living in the emotional territory of isolation, estrangement, and emptiness. Naturally his dramas and novels became the embodiments of the experiences of the contemporary humanity.

However, Wilder treated the questions of identity and isolation not in sociological but in metaphysical terms. His chief problem was not the problem

of social but the spiritual identity in a hostile or unfeeling universe. Obviously, Thornton did not give us a social vision, but a metaphysical vision, remarkable for its mystical qualities and mythic themes, that were eventually characterized by religious feeling, which quickened spiritual energy. Though, Wilder was devoted to the Christian tradition and its myths, his approach was not sectarian. His metaphysical proclivities aligned him with such great contemporaries, as Eliot, Pound, and Joyce. Besides, for him, the individual was the miniature of the universe and a universal symbol of reality. Obviously, he transformed the individuals into mythical figures of modern religious beings. It was this vision, compounded of metaphysics, myth, and religion which he unfolded in his works.

Thornton was a tremendous author, writing all sorts of things; novels, based on foreign settings; picaresque novels of different types as well as philosophical novels, floating in the teleological tide; and also plays, including one act as well as full length plays incorporating visions of survival. Thornton not only wrote a great deal but also achieved a great deal, winning prizes and earning a great literary reputation, as well as a lot of money. In terms of prizes, he was the only person to win Pulitzer-Prize for three different books, written in two different literary modes viz., The Bridge of San Luis Rey, a novel and also for Our Town and The Skin of Our Teeth, the plays. Thornton also bagged National Book Award for The Eighth Day. As for money, some of his books were among the best sellers. His publishers sold three hundred thousand copies of The Bridge of San Luis Rey within two years. They also sold ninety

thousand copies of Heaven's My Destination in the United States and two hundred fifty thousand copies in Germany. Much in the same way, another of his book Theophilus North occupied a prominent position on the New York Times as the best seller for twenty one weeks.

In most of his books, Thornton unfolded his mytho-religious vision. It was as central to his early works, as to the later. To begin with his moral, religious, and aesthetic themes prefigure in The Angel That Troubled the Waters, composed between 1915 and 1927 and published in 1928. In this collection of plays, Thornton embodies his aesthetic and mystic Platonism as well as Christian mysticism. His mytho-religious vision also prefigures in his romances which include, The Cabala (1926), The Bridge of San Luis Rey (1927), and The Woman of Andros (1930).

In The Cabala, Wilder used the aristocratic background of the modern Rome and articulated the growing threat of fascism and expressed retrogressive ideas about a highly reactionary utopia. Writing under the influence of Proust, Branch Cabell, and Henry James, Thornton creates the powerful image of Virgil, the great exemplar of the ancient world, who can, "invest the almost ridiculous inadequacies of the Cabalists with a humanity that lends warmth and beauty even to the decay."<sup>38</sup>

In another romance, The Bridge of San Luis Rey, Wilder amalgamates European classical elements with an American naturalness of form. He embodies, "events that show man's defenselessness, the suffocating meaninglessness of existence, the cold loneliness of the individual, and at the

same time his deep longing for security, love, and meaningfulness.”<sup>39</sup> According to Rex Burbank, The Bridge of San Luis Rey is remarkable for its symbolism as well as for its combination of past and present, the moral and religious themes, and the episodic structure. It is known not so much for its surface realism, as for its complex working of the inner life. The third romance, ushers readers yet into another ancient world. If The Cabala took place in Rome, 1920 and The Bridge of San Luis Rey in Peru, 1974, The Woman of Andros went farther back in time and place to pre-Christian Greece. “Published in 1930, The Woman appeared at an unpropitious time, for the depression was under way and the climate of opinion was not favourable to fiction that ignored current economic and political problems. Understandably, the book failed with both the critics and the public.”<sup>40</sup>

While in romances, Thornton provided us a foreign perspective, in plays like The Long Christmas Dinner and Heaven's My Destination, he goes on to produce a specific American perspective. In The Long Christmas Dinner, he uses the present and involves for the most part American characters of unpretentious origin. The plays, embodied in this volume, mark Wilder's approach to realism, colloquial style, conventional plotting, and the fusion of non-realistic and realistic materials.

Wilder gives another version of his American perspective in Heaven's My Destination (1935). He set this novel in the immediate present i.e. in the period of Great Depression. “He showed himself quite capable of portraying an American similar to those who exist in the realistic literature of the United

States. Even the numerous secondary figures of the story, in their conversations and views about life, behave like average Americans.”<sup>41</sup>

In his plays, Thornton continues to project his mytho-religious vision. In Our Town, The Matchmaker, and The Skin of Our Teeth, he embodies some other remarkable variants. Written under the influence of Gertrude Stein, most of these works are marked with his humanistic convictions, including his ideas of human body, human mind, and human nature. With Stein, Wilder believes that eternal human truths can be found in literary masterpieces. Some of these truths can be found in American life as well. Interestingly, as pointed out earlier, Stein makes a distinction between body and mind as well as human nature and human mind. Explaining Stein’s distinctions of body, mind, and nature, Burbank writes, “Human nature, she said, clings to ‘self,’ to identity, to location in time and place, and to survival; but human mind, in Wilder’s words, ‘knowing no time and identity, can realize [a nonself situation]’ as an objective fact of experience.” Human mind contemplates pure existing and pure creating, she maintained, and can be observed in masterpieces which record the timeless and universal; but it can also be seen in the America which has always identified itself with world destiny.”<sup>42</sup>

In Our Town, Thornton finds a value for the smallest events of daily life. Pitched in a low key with a pastoral setting, the novel involves the ordinary events in the life of ordinary people. However, the novel set the whole village against the larger dimensions of time and place. It shows, how the people of Grover’s Corners live their lives banally in as much as they are unaware of the



value of life and seldom get beneath or above the surface of life. Nevertheless, their experience is priceless.

Thornton's next play, The Matchmaker is a "free adaptation" of Nestroy's play Einen Jux willey sich Machen (vienna, 1982), which in turn was based upon John Oxenham's A Day Well Spent (London, 1935). Like Heaven's My Destination, The Matchmaker demonstrates that a vigorous and robust spirit of humanism is the only answer to materialism. It also entails that the effective reform begins, not with legislation but with moral improvement. In his next play, The Skin of Our Teeth (1942), Wilder goes on to produce another version of humanism. Written under the influence of James Joyce and Frazer, in the play Wilder unfolds humanistic temperament, which sees a comical and ridiculous facet of the good and bad in man, including Americans. Assuming an allegorical form, it highlights the relationship between the American and destiny. Although the play marks Wilder's interest in the action of American society, his main concern is how these acts establish one's place within the unity of all humanity.

In novels, like The Ides of March (1948) and The Alcestiad (1960), Wilder goes on to exemplify two variants of existentialist humanism. While in the former, he embodies the ethical humanism of Sartre, in the latter he articulates the mystical humanism of Berdyaev. According to Rex Burbank, The Ides of March remains Wilder's best novel. It is informed by a "[C]omplexity of vision and intricacy of organization place it above any of his other fictional works. In the novel, Burbank adds, Wilder achieves the most completely

satisfying vision presented in his works of fiction.”<sup>43</sup> The vision, which Wilder achieves is invariably the vision of the people of Rome, having a direct relation with human destiny. Written in an epistolary form, The Ides of March is a, “historical evocation, a fantasia, and a series of discourses.”<sup>44</sup> Structurally, the novel is divided into four books that cover the last year of Julius Caesar’s life. Wilder focuses his attention on Caesar’s self-destroying nature of his belief in total commitment to action. He also depicts his loneliness as the ruler of Rome, which symbolizes man’s isolation not only in his world but in the universe.

However, the novel is more remarkable for its inclusion of the Existentialist philosophy of Sartre, especially his propositions, “that existence precedes essence, that man is ‘nothing else but that which he makes of himself,’ that he is responsible for all his fellowmen, that he is ‘condemned to be free,’ that there is no reality or morality except in commitment to action, and that there are no a priori values. Therefore, the ‘moral choice is comparable to the construction of a work of art’; for, like the artist, man is forced to create his own moral world.”<sup>45</sup> However, Wilder does not subscribe to all these propositions. He is attentive only to the ethical ideas of Sartre. His humanism, unlike Sartre’s, is imbued with religious faith. Any how he is careful enough to keep his moral considerations, separate from religious doctrines.

In The Alcestiad, Thornton goes on to embody the mystic humanism of another existentialist, Berdyaev. Based on the legend of Alcestis, it portrays the hero as Christ, “whose birth brought religious sanction to the moral and ethical principles Chrysis and Pamphilus already embraced.”<sup>46</sup> The novel is an

existentialist allegory in as much as it portrays a mystic pilgrimage. The vision, which it presents, is mystical in as much as it portrays the union of Alcestis and Apollo in divine love. At the same time, it is existentialist, since it illustrates the necessity of a complete commitment to life in human love and self-sacrifice as the first step towards achieving divine grace. Besides, it uses an existentialist terminology, which makes its hero, a kind of spiritual legislator for mankind. Interestingly, it also embodies, "[t]he existentialist, mystical nature of the ethical, religious, and metaphysical themes that culminate in the epiphany."<sup>47</sup> The mystical nature of Wilder's vision marks a close kinship with Berdyaev's Existentialism which, "effects the identification of the religious life with ethics and the divine in the human which Wilder tries to establish in this play."<sup>48</sup>

In the books, written at the fag end of the career, especially the books included in The Seven Ages of Man Wilder continues with his ethical and religious themes. But in such books as The Eighth Day, his tone becomes a little more philosophical. In the novel, he pays a special attention to American's having, "a special relationship to the universal and timeless truths of the human race."<sup>49</sup> Thornton is a writer, who believes in the American Dream and the greatness of his people. Since Americans are free from the chains of tradition, the confinement of the place and historical compulsions, which hamper men's progress, they have a great future ahead of them. With the Protestant virtues of responsibility, industriousness, and independence, they possess creative talents and have a great capacity for love, self-sacrifice, and dedication to the alleviation of suffering. All these qualities make them a distinctive people.

Here Wilder recovers the dreams of his great American predecessors like, Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, Channing, and Parker. But at the same time in his American Dream he is also attentive to, "the fundamental moral issues of the twentieth century, when the values of the Judeo-Christian and Classical traditions have sustained their most devastating assaults by industrialism, Freudian psychology, state paternalism, the loosening of family ties, the depersonalization of human relationships, and the steady loss of meaningful connection with the past. Few writers in this century have undertaken such a Herculean task; fewer still could have undertaken it – lacking Wilder's combination of intellectual sophistication and narrative skill; only the best – Yeats, Joyce, Mann, Eliot – among those writing in this century have done better."<sup>50</sup>

Thornton's last major work Theophilus North (1973), is not so much important for his mytho-religious vision as for his personal biography. The book is essentially about being young, being ingenious, being resourceful, and being Thornton Wilder. The protagonist of Theophilus North is an active, imaginative, and effectual character. His presence animates the novel and motivates its dull people. Since he is drawn after Wilder himself, he shares not only the best energies of his creator but also becomes a kind of spokesman for him, ventilating his creator's wit, joy, and the powers of imagination.

In nutshell, Thornton Wilder was one of the most versatile creative writers of the United States of America. He was the only one, who received America's most coveted literary awards the Pulitzer-Prize for two different

modes, novel as well as drama. He was an embodiment of American consciousness with a difference. For the most part, he did not swim with the contemporary literary currents but set his massive weight like Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, and James Joyce against the popular trends of Romanticism, Realism, and Naturalism. Although he is fully conscious of the social and ideological upheavals as well as the phenomenal growth of science and technology, he does not confine himself to the portrayal of contemporary scene but goes on to articulate the totality of human experience, especially the mytho-religious experience.

As for the formative influences, his family background, education, travels abroad, and close association with the contemporary masters of literature, all combined to shape his moral and aesthetic consciousness. His parents, especially mother, elder brother, and younger sister, contributed to inform his mind. Various schools and colleges, which he attended, Mission Boys School at Chefoo, Thacher School in Ojai, Berkeley High School, Oberlin College etc. and his teaching at Lawrenceville School, went on to acquaint him with great creative writers and thinkers and to stimulate his creative faculty. Likewise, Thornton's experience at Rome and MacDowell Colony also reinforced his aesthetic powers. His proximity with Edwin Arlington Robinson and Gertrude Stein in particular was a constant source of inspiration. Furthermore, Thornton's studies of Kafka, Kierkegaard, Genet, Sartre the philosophers; Mann, Boccaccio, the Greeks; and Zen Buddhism went on to fortify his mytho-religious vision. Thornton unfolds this vision in his stories,

novels, and plays alike. In his first important work, The Angel That Troubled the Waters a collection of plays, Thornton gives expression to the aesthetic and mystic Platonism as well as Christian mysticism. His mytho-religious vision also prefigures his romances like The Cabala, The Bridge of San Luis Rey, and The Woman of Andros. These romances take us to three different countries: The Cabala, to Rome of 1920, The Bridge of San Luis Rey, to Peru of 1914, and The Woman of Andros, to pre-Christian Greece.

However, in plays, Thornton takes a different line. While in romances, Thornton provides us a foreign perspective, in plays like The Long Christmas Dinner and Heaven's My Destination, he goes on to produce a specific American perspective. But in some full length plays, Wilder enlarges his vision and raises some deeper questions of existence. For example in Our Town, he sets the ordinary events of ordinary people in a larger perspective of time and place. In the other play, The Matchmaker, he tells us that the contemporary materialism can be combated only by the vigorous and robust spirit of humanism. Likewise, in his play, The Skin of Our Teeth, Wilder highlights the relationship between the American and destiny.

In the later novels, Wilder's tone becomes thoroughly humanistic. He experiments with various forms of existentialists humanism. While in The Ides of March, he deals with the ethical humanism of Sartre, in The Alcestiad, he goes on to incorporate Berdyaev's mystical humanism. Interestingly, there is a change of tone as well as themes in the books, written during the fag end of his career. For instance, in The Eighth Day, he comes to deal with the universal and

timeless truths, whereas in Theophilus North, he writes something like his own biography.

## Chapter 1 – Notes

<sup>1</sup>Egbert S. Oliver, "Introduction," American Literature 1890-1965 Anthology, ed. with an introduction (New Delhi: Eurasia Publishing House, 1955, rep. 1983) 1: hereafter the article cited as Introduction and the book as American Literature.

<sup>2</sup>Foster Rea Dulles, The United States since 1865 (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1959) 120-121: hereafter cited as Dulles.

<sup>3</sup>John D. Rockefeller qtd. William J. Ghent, Our Benevolent Federation (New York: 1902) 29: hereafter cited as Ghent.

<sup>4</sup>David F. Bowers, Hegel, Darwin and The American Tradition: Foreign Influence in America (npd) 44: hereafter cited as Bowers.

<sup>5</sup>Hamlin Garland, A Son of The Middle Border (New York: McMillan, 1966) 273: hereafter cited as Garland.

<sup>6</sup>Oliver 1.

<sup>7</sup>Oliver 3.

<sup>8</sup>George Pellow, The New Battle of Books (Forum, npd) 564: hereafter cited as Pellow.

<sup>9</sup>Percy H. Boynton, A History of American Literature (New York: 1919) 412: hereafter cited as Boynton.

<sup>10</sup>Norman Foster, Image of America (Univ. of Natredem Press, 1962) 108: hereafter cited as Foster.

<sup>11</sup>Dulles 115.

<sup>12</sup>W.D. Howells, Criticism and Fiction (New York: n.p., 1892) 73: hereafter cited as Howells.

<sup>13</sup>Howells 99.

<sup>14</sup>Alfred Kazin, On the Native Grounds (New York: n.p., 1942) 8: hereafter cited as Kazin.

<sup>15</sup>Oliver 4.



<sup>16</sup>Thornton Wilder, qtd. Michael J. Vivion, "Wilder Thornton," "Sidelights," Contemporary Authors, New Revision Series, Volume 40 (n.p.) 477: hereafter the article cited as Vivion and the book as Contemporary Authors.

<sup>17</sup>Vivion Contemporary Authors 476.

<sup>18</sup>David Castronovo, Thornton Wilder (New York: The Ungar Publishing Company, 1986) 5: hereafter cited as Castronovo.

<sup>19</sup>Linda Simon, Thornton Wilder: His World (New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc. Garden City, 1979) 10: hereafter cited as Simon.

<sup>20</sup>Simon 19.

<sup>21</sup>Simon 20.

<sup>22</sup>Simon 21.

<sup>23</sup>Rex Burbank, Thornton Wilder (Boston: Twayne Publisher, 1961) 19: hereafter cited as Burbank.

<sup>24</sup>Burbank 19.

<sup>25</sup>Simon 35.

<sup>26</sup>Simon 34.

<sup>27</sup>Simon 34.

<sup>28</sup>Simon 39.

<sup>29</sup>Castronovo 16.

<sup>30</sup>Thornton Wilder qtd. Castronovo 16.

<sup>31</sup>Castronovo 16.

<sup>32</sup>Thornton Wilder qtd. Castronovo 17.

<sup>33</sup>Castronovo 19-20.

<sup>34</sup>Castronovo 20.

<sup>35</sup>Castronovo 1.

<sup>36</sup>Castronovo 2.

<sup>37</sup>Castronovo 31.

<sup>38</sup>Hermann Stresau, "Wilder Thornton," eds. Sharon R. Gunton, and Laurie Lanzen Harris, Contemporary Literary Criticism Volume 15, (Detroit, Michigan: Gale Research Company Book Tower, 1980) 571: hereafter the article cited as Hermann Stresau and the book as Literary Criticism with vol.

<sup>39</sup>Hermann Stresau, Literary Criticism 571.

<sup>40</sup>Burbank 49-50.

<sup>41</sup>Hermann Stresau, Literary Criticism 572.

<sup>42</sup>Burbank 70-71.

<sup>43</sup>Burbank 105-106.

<sup>44</sup>Castronovo 126.

<sup>45</sup>Sartre qtd. Burbank 98.

<sup>46</sup>Burbank 106.

<sup>47</sup>Burbank 110.

<sup>48</sup>Burbank 112.

<sup>49</sup>Burbank 116.

<sup>50</sup>Burbank 122-123.

## CHAPTER 2

### A NOTE TOWARDS WILDER'S MYTHO-RELIGIOUS VISION

In the preceding chapter, we have seen the development of Thornton Wilder's Mytho-Religious Vision, in which he employs his creative energies to deal with the larger issues of American consciousness. Evidently, Thornton does not confine himself merely to the surface issues, raised by the contemporary literary movements, like Romanticism, Realism, and Naturalism, but goes on to address himself to the deeper questions of religious and ethical values as well as to the issues, related to the worth and dignity of man. He is willing to focus his attention not only on new ideas, produced by amazing developments in the natural and social sciences but is eager to revive the wisdom of antiquity, embodied in the great classics of philosophy and literature, the great religious themes, and the perennial questions of human dignity.

In view of the centrality of the mytho-religious elements in Wilder's vision, let us form a precise notion of religion and myth. To begin with, Thornton's vision is informed by his deep spiritual proclivities. He is determined to maintain his spiritual identity in an indifferent universe, hostile to religious interests. For this purpose, Thornton is consistently attentive to the

physical and spiritual life of twentieth century America. He takes upon himself the responsibility of recovering the spiritual elements of the ancient world. Subsequently, Thornton revives great religious and mythic themes, which are characterized by a pervasive religious feeling. He endeavours to shape a religious rhetoric capable of renewing spiritual energy and to exploit Christian myths imbued with religious spirit. Wilder believes that it is only literature which can restore man's spiritual view of the world. It is the only source, which can quicken man's spiritual energies. There is no wonder that, "Wilder spent his entire career searching for a diction that would revitalize the various myths underlying Christianity."<sup>1</sup>

In Thornton's Mytho-Religious Vision, religion is the most crucial term. Though Wilder adheres to Christianity he however, does not interpret it in sectarian terms. Christianity for him is neither a revealed nor a historical religion. It is rather a set of ethical and spiritual values. Although he is a deistic in his approach, he remains essentially a religious Platonist. According to Hermann Stresau, Wilder's religion is neither doctrinal nor an abstraction. It is rather a realistic term which deals with the concrete reality that lies beyond time and place. As Stresau writes, "Wilder does not commit himself. For him, even in the earliest works, religion is not a doctrine, not an 'idea' or abstraction that, paradoxically linked with actual existence, burdens common sense with conflicting enigmas. One might almost say that religion for him is something perceptively tangible, though beyond the here and now. It is life

that is accessible perhaps only to the imagination, but once revealed, it is seen to be meaningful and significant.”<sup>2</sup>

Obviously, Wilder is concerned not so much with the present as with the things that lie beyond it, i.e. with what is permanent and eternal or limitless in terms of time and space. Such themes of eternity are accessible not to senses but only to imagination. Wilder’s idea of eternity is closely related to his idea of destiny. He believes that the awareness of continuity in human action, enables us to have a sense of destiny. The awareness of continuity means, an awareness that every present moment comes from the past and is directed to the future. In the movements of emotional crisis, we become aware of the future and come to develop a sense of destiny. “It is this sense of destiny that is the great human reality and the tragedy of life lies in our fragmentary and imperfect awareness of it.”<sup>3</sup> Wilder thinks that the themes of eternity and permanence are expanded and deepened by the element of love.

In Wilder’s vision, element of love occupies the central place and goes on to inform most of his work. The theme of love is intertwined with the theme of life which involves in its turn, the question of living. Manifestly the question of living entails the relationship of the individual with the universal. According to Stresau, Wilder believes that it is not human institutions or technology but only humanity, which can provide humanity with a solid foothold in this turning world. To quote Stresau, “In all these works of Wilder, the religious question How does one live? is never formulated as a theory. If there is something absolute by which human beings can orient their lives, it is

neither the state nor society nor the rationale of technology. All these authorities have their limits beyond which questions such as the relation of the individual to the universal become crucial.”<sup>4</sup>

Ostensibly, Wilder’s religious position is a little paradoxical, as it is neither exclusively religious nor philosophical. Francis Fergusson defines his position as, “a sort of religious Platonism.”<sup>5</sup> Wilder, it seems, is torn between Platonism and Christianity. While his Platonism assumes a deistic form, his Christianity takes on Unitarian colouring, reminiscent of his great Transcendental predecessors, especially Walt Whitman, whose personalism left an indelible impression on his mind. For all intents and purposes, Wilder’s religion is closely interlinked with his humanism. Interestingly, it forms his most distinctive quality which separates him from other novelists and playwrights of his generation. As a humanist, Wilder attempts to reconcile two forms of humanism, the New Humanism and the Christian Humanism.

To elaborate, New Humanism represented by Irving Babbitt and Paul Elmer More, follows Matthew Arnold in condemning the Darwinian ideals of philosophical naturalism. Wilder approves the basic beliefs of the New Humanists concerning human nature and the values of cultural past, but he disapproves a number of their notions. Wilder goes on to appreciate some basic points of T.S. Eliot’s Religious Humanism. Eliot declared that humanism could not stand without religious faith. For him, ethical affirmations cannot stand without religious justification. Eliot wrote, “Humanism is either an alternative to religion, or is ancillary to it... it always flourishes most when

religion has been strong; and if you find examples of humanism which are anti-religious, or at least in opposition to the religious faith of the place and time, then such humanism is purely destructive, for it has never found anything to replace what it has destroyed." But on the other hand, Eliot added, "[a]ny religion... is for ever in danger of petrification into mere ritual and habit, though ritual and habit be essential to religion. It is only renewed and refreshed by an awakening of feeling and fresh devotion, or by the critical reason. The latter may be the part of the humanist."<sup>6</sup>

As a humanist, Wilder's position is unique. He accepts neither New Humanism nor Eliot's Religious Humanism. He rather stands halfway between them. While Thornton goes on to accept the points, congenial to his mytho-religious vision, he does not hesitate to reject the ones which sound a discordant note. As Rex Burbank states, "Wilder's humanism was akin to the New Humanism in its insistence upon the validity of human values inherited from the cultural past, but his, like Eliot's, had a religious foundation and a sensitivity to the aesthetic as well as the ethical qualities of literature. Yet, unlike Eliot's, Wilder's Christian humanism was nondoctrinal and free of sectarian or ritualistic tendencies."<sup>7</sup>

According to Burbank, Wilder's humanism is akin to Walt Whitman's. It highlights the element of faith in life and in human values. For him, man is the measure of all things. Wilder's humanism has invariably a religious vein, which provides him a basis for the justification of human values. He holds all dogmas and absolutes at abeyance and rejects the excesses of religious beliefs,

puritanical moralism and the coldness of rationalistic temper. "Anything," writes Burbank, "that (binds) the human spirit and (prevents) its freedom to love and create [is] the target of Wilder's critical humanism."<sup>8</sup>

Evidently, Thornton's religion is not a simple, but a complex pattern of multiple threads, comprising humanism, Christianity, the religious views of Gertrude Stein, Soren Kierkegaard, and other existentialists as well as his own religious principles. As for his humanism, it can be defined only in religious terms. But these terms are neither exclusively Protestant nor Catholic. Though Thornton begins with Protestantism, inherited from his family, he goes on to redefine it in the light of his experience with Stein and the study of Kierkegaard.

As discussed earlier, Thornton belonged to a devout Protestant family. His parents were actively involved in Church education. His brother Amos, who wrote some volumes of religious poetry, was a teacher of Theology at Harvard. Interestingly, Wilder was educated in schools which had a religious atmosphere. The Mission Boy's School, which he attended in China, had religious background. Another institution, Oberlin College was also emphatically religious in its undergraduate life and curriculum. As his early works exemplify, Wilder absorbed the religious elements in his early days and used them to inform his creative writing. One should not be surprised to find Protestant sermons, everywhere in his novels and drama alike. Wilder frequently takes a biblical text and then expounds upon it, examining some of its implications for the Christian life. As an instance, one can cite The Angel



That Troubled the Waters (1928) a volume of sixteen three-minute plays, selected from about forty pieces, composed between 1915 and 1927. These plays are written on the great religious themes. Obviously in them, Wilder takes upon himself the difficult task of reviving to the spiritual life in terms of Platonism and Christianity. Explaining his intentions, he states:

I hope, through many mistakes, to discover the spirit that is not unequal to the elevation of the great religious themes, yet which does not fall into repellent didacticism. Didacticism is an attempt at the coercion of another's free mind, even though one knows that in these matters beyond logic, beauty is the only persuasion. Here the schoolmaster enters...He sees all that is fairest in the Christian tradition made repugnant to the new generations by reason of the diction in which it is expressed. The intermittent sincerity of generations of clergymen and teachers has rendered embarrassing and even ridiculous all the terms of the spiritual life. Nothing succeeds in damping the aspirations of the young today – who dares use the word “aspiration” without enclosing it, knowingly, in quotation marks? – like the names they hear given to them. The revival of religion is almost a matter of rhetoric. The work is difficult, perhaps impossible (perhaps all religions die out with the exhaustion of the language), but it at least reminds us that Our Lord asked us in His Work to be not only as gentle as doves, but as wise as serpents.<sup>9</sup>

Wilder continues with his Christian vein, for a long time. In the plays of The Angel That Troubled the Waters, he not only revives Christian tradition but also attempts to bring fresh life and meaning to the spiritual life. He uses parables and fables to teach Platonic or Christian lessons of faith, love, humanity, sacrifice, etc. At the same time Thornton highlights such elements as superstition, reason, pride or selfishness. In the first play of the volume, “Nascuntur Poetae,” he sets forth his mystical Platonic view, which he goes on to repeat in “Centaurus.” In some of the plays, Thornton endeavours to

reconcile Platonism with Christianity. For instance, in "Mozart and the Gray Steward," he interprets the essentials of Platonism in terms of Christian theology. Likewise, Thornton conjoins philosophy of Platonism with Christian mysticism in such plays as "And the Sea Shall Give up Its Dead," "Leviathan," and "Child Roland to the Dark Tower Came." However, in other plays, Wilder takes up exclusively to Christian themes. For instance, in plays like "Now the Servant's Name Was Malchus," "Hast Thou Considered My Servant Job?" "The Flight into Egypt," and "The Angel That Troubled the Waters," he deals only with biblical characters and Christian paradoxes. "Each of these four books," writes Burbank, "is the work of a believer speaking primarily to other believers and cautioning them against intolerance, against trying to justify faith with reason, and against biblical literalism. They recall that faith is very difficult to maintain in the face of reason and the unpleasant facts of life and that it is more often accompanied by suffering and doubt than by comfort and certitude."<sup>10</sup>

In his longer stage plays, which are comparatively more mature, Thornton continues with his Christian vein, examining the moral values of Judeo-Christian tradition and employing models and materials from the Classical Greek and Roman masterpieces. However, in these plays, he adopts a different literary strategy. First of all, his borrowings, for the most part, are direct. Next, he directs his attention to modern movements like Naturalism and Expressionism to adopt modern models. In this connection, he looks towards the theatrical expressionism of August Strindberg. It is remarkable that

Thornton remains no longer interested in the social realism of Henric Ibaen or Henri Beeque or the naturalism of Eugene O'Neill. "The use of animated scenery," observes Burbank, "in [the] three-minute plays, as well as characterizations that express or represent ideas, suggests that in addition to the Bible, Plato, and the Classical myths of Greece and Rome, he was 'assimilating' the theatricalist modes of Strindberg's Dream Play and Ghost Sonata."<sup>11</sup>

In his novels as well, Thornton remains remarkably faithful to his religious vision. In such books as The Bridge of San Luis Rey and The Woman of Andros, he revives the themes of divine justice, mercy, and Christian rebirth, which were central to his The Trumpet Shall Sound. However, in The Bridge of San Luis Rey, he is not so much attentive to his Protestantism as to the Roman Catholicism. Nevertheless, he is not at all successful in his treatment of Catholicism, since he uses it not as a thematic principle but only as an artistic device. For his thematic concerns, he continues to depend on the religious faith of his family i.e. Protestantism. According to Donald Haberman, "Wilder's use of Roman Catholicism, rather than his own native Protestantism, however, exposes a weakness in the book. Catholicism is presented as mere aesthetic, that is, as color, movement, music, and other outward forms; the meaning and life of the novel's characters is closer to old-fashioned Protestant individual will. Much more important, the rhetoric used to convey the meaning of the novel at most critical points, is in the worst sense literary and, like the Catholicism, false."<sup>12</sup>

In The Woman of Andros, Thornton takes recourse to a new type of Christianity, the new parlour Christianity, which pervades the entire book. It is present in the form of gentle theatrical sighs, lovely and well composed death as well as martyrdoms, languishing, and flattering of God's sinning doves. However, in the one act plays, written after The Woman of Andros, Wilder goes on to adopt a different thematic line. The plays, incorporated in The Long Christmas Dinner, announce his departure from his early religious vision. He now inculcates a mixed vision, which blends religion with philosophy. This blending is best exemplified in Pullman Car Hiawatha. Wilder introduces actors to represent the town, the field, the ghost of a dead workman, the hours, the planets, and the archangels. He also presents the speeches of the hours, from 9 O'clock to 12 O'clock, each hour repeating a few words of some of the other philosopher. As the playwright explains, "[t]he minutes are gossips; the hours are philosophers; the years are theologians. The hours are philosophers with the exception of Twelve O'clock who is also a theologian – Ready Ten O'clock!"<sup>13</sup>

Harberman has selected these words of the philosophers and arranged them for a cumulative effect. These speeches reproduce and interpret life. To quote him:

Spinoza:

After experience had taught me that the common occurrences of daily life are vain and futile; and I saw that all the objects of my desire and fear were in themselves nothing good nor bad save insofar as the mind was affected by them; I at length determined

to search out whether there was something truly good and communicable to man.”<sup>14</sup>

Without a pause the words from Plato follow:

Then tell me, O Critias, how will a man choose the ruler that shall rule over him? Will he not choose a man who has first established order in himself, knowing that any decision that has its spring from anger or pride or vanity can be multiplied a thousand fold in its effects upon the citizens?

(The Skin of Our Teeth 249)

Then Aristotle:

This good estate of the mind possessing its object in energy we call divine. This we mortals have occasionally and it is this energy which is pleasantest and best. But God has it always. It is wonderful in us; but in Him how much more wonderful.

(The Skin of Our Teeth 249)

Finally the unknown writer of Genesis:

In the beginning, God created the Heavens and the Earth; And the Earth was waste and void; And the darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Lord said let there be light and there was light.

(The Skin of Our Teeth 249-250)

Read in the aforesaid order, the speeches give us an idea not only of life and discipline but also of God. According to Thornton, the meaning of life is subjective, since man interprets life in his own way. Furthermore, as Plato suggests, he can provide significance to his life by making it disciplined. However, this element of discipline, forms only a small part of the greater experience of man's relation to God, as Aristotle believes. Thornton goes on to reinforce the philosophical ideas of Spinoza, Plato, and Aristotle, with the idea of biblical God, who is the beginning and the end of all things at one and

the same time. It is this philosophical religious idea of divinity which, according to Thornton, is the ultimate source of everyday human action. He believes that all the petty everyday actions of everybody exist in the mind of God. Thornton illustrates this point in the first act of Our Town, when Rebecca tells George of a letter Jane Crofut received. The letter is addressed to, "Jane Crofut; The Crofut Farm; Grover's Corners; Sutton Country; New Hampshire; United States of America;... Continent of the North America; Western Hemisphere; the Earth; the Solar System; the Universe; the Mind of God."<sup>15</sup> This address is reminiscent of James Joyce's A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man. The address hints that religion depends neither on biblical text nor on dogma, nor on any special faith or sects, but on one's religiosity.

However, Wilder arrives at his true religious vision, rather late after passing through a number of phases. His ultimate religious vision is neither Protestant nor Catholic, nor religio-philosophical but purely American. It is only after his association with Gertrude Stein that Thornton comes to understand the American view of religion, a view that has been developed by his great American predecessors, especially, Thoreau and Whitman. According to Stein, religion is not only an awareness of one's self but also that of the surrounding life. Furthermore, it is a knowing beyond knowing or a knowing which cannot be known by any other source. Explaining Stein's idea of religion, Thornton writes:

Religion, as Miss Stein uses the term, has very little to do with cults and dogma, particularly in America... Religion is what a person knows – knows beyond knowing, knows beyond anyone's

power to teach him – about his relation to the existence in which he finds himself.<sup>16</sup>

Obviously, Stein's idea of religion embodies three points: self-awareness, awareness of surrounding life, and the intensity of living. According to Donald Sutherland, Stein does not believe in a dogmatic religion, but in a religion that is rather poetic or intuitional:

a saint, whether he does anything or not, exists in and with the universe and shares its life, sustained in existence by the general miracle of the present world. St. Teresa's remark, "Among the cooking pots moves the Lord," is perhaps the most vivid statement of that. The basis of this intimate exaltation over living with the life of the world was of course not, with Gertrude Stein, the Holy Spirit as in Christian theology, even when she used Christian saints and symbols to articulate what she meant, but rather a vital and radical poetic attitude or intuition.<sup>17</sup>

Following Stein, Wilder too goes on to develop a poetic and intuitive attitude towards religion. This new attitude surfaces in such books as Our Town, The Merchant of Yonkers, and The Skin of Our Teeth. However, Thornton comes to this position only after understanding the difficulties of his early vision. These difficulties are embodied in the epigraph of Heaven's My Destination.

However, for the confirmation of his ideas about human action and religious intensity, Thornton goes to Roman history, medieval myths, and the Greek Classics. In The Ides of March, he evokes Goethe's Faust as well as the story of Julius Caesar. While with the story of Faust, he narrates man's recognition of the Unknowable, with that of Julius Caesar, he presents the

element of destiny. Obviously it is the story of Faust, which provides the motto of The Ides of March. As Wilder tells a magazine interviewer it:

is from Goethe's "Faust," a passage... freely translated as : Out of man's recognition in fear and awe that there is an unknowable comes all that is best in the explorations of his mind – even though that recognition is often misled into superstition, enslavement, and overconfidence.<sup>18</sup>

In Goethe's Faust, Wilder finds man's recognition of the Unknowable, especially in the moments of fear and awe. He gets the confirmation of this idea in Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling as well. In the career of Julius Caesar, Thornton comes to realize the distinction between superstition and religion as well as the role of destiny in human action. He states:

The book attempts to show the mind of a man like Julius Caesar, with enormous experience of men and affairs, trying to separate the elements of superstition from those of religion... and attempting to ascertain whether his great role in the Roman state was of his own making or whether he was the instrument of a Destiny Force beyond his knowledge.<sup>19</sup>

As for the confirmation of the element of intensity, Wilder turns towards the Classical Greek theatre, especially to the plays of Sophocles. In Oedipus Rex, he finds the element of divine intervention in human affairs. Thornton also evinces keen interest in Sophocles' treatment of God, not as a subjective but an objective force. His views on the nature of divinity are reflected in his introduction to Francis Storr's translation of Oedipus Rex:

The Oedipus Rex opens at the moment that the "other world" has chosen to intervene in human affairs, to set in motion the train of events that will bring to light the enormities in Oedipus' past. The action of Macbeth and Hamlet is likewise instituted by supernatural agencies, but the witches and the ghost of Hamlet's father are easily understood as externalizations of the promptings



within the protagonists' minds. In the Greek plays, however, the gods are objective forces and the audience received the anguish of Oedipus and the suicide of Iocasta as being required by a power greater and "other" than subjective fancy, and under a necessity more significant than the hereditary curse which Sophocles has elevated to a larger fatality, the cleansing will of Apollo.<sup>20</sup>

For Thornton, besides the conception of divinity, the Greek drama is also remarkable for religious intensity, or "the presence of the numinous," i.e. divine element. Elsewhere, Thornton writes:

There has been little religious drama in Europe since the Greeks, and the theatre has lost one of its most powerful effects – the shudder and awe induced by the presence of the numinous, by the tremendum of religious experience.<sup>21</sup>

It is remarkable that Thornton goes on to read Greek Classics, in the light of the existentialism of Soren Kierkegaard. But surprisingly, he hallows the pessimistic proclivities of his vision and endeavours to develop from it an optimistic view of life. His efforts are reminiscent of his study of Finnegans Wake of James Joyce. In that case too, Thornton transforms Joyce's pessimistic vision into an affirmative one. Thornton is much impressed by the basic principles of Kierkegaard's existential philosophy, especially his notions of absurdity of man's relation to the universe, the leap of faith by acknowledging the element of dread in human life, and religious intensity. He incorporates these elements to reinforce his vision.

However, before adopting Kierkegaard's ideas, Wilder acclimatizes and attunes them to his own philosophy of life. In Kierkegaard he finds not only a confirmation of his vision but also a way to articulate his visionary flights. Naturally Wilder goes on to acknowledge his ideological debt to him. For

instance, in his address on the Blashfield Foundation of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, he states:

Another mode open to us is to accept a Time of Troubles as an outward expression of an incoherence of man's inner life – and that such an incoherence is an eternal condition – is indeed, a norm. This view has high authority. Matthew Arnold quoted with approval Goethe's remark that "the Iliad teaches us that it is our task here on earth to enact Hell daily." For our times the principal exponent of this view is Soren Kierkegaard. His description of the basic absurdity of man's relation to the universe has enjoyed an ever-increasing influence in our time. Out of that absurdity he made and counsels, the leap of faith; but Kierkegaard's "faith by paradox"... does not sound like the faith we have associated with ages of security. For him the leap of faith cannot take place without an acknowledgment of one's life in dread. It is naturally a doctrine of this school that those persons who are not aware of this tension in themselves are merely immature and that a culture which does not exhibit it is either childlike or hypocritical or consciously playacting – pretending that there is no dread, no absurdity, no leap, and no need for an explanation of experience...

The artist [unlike the philosopher] is under no such compulsion to supply final answers and to balance the books of good an evil... If, as Goethe says, it is our duty in these times and in all times to enact Hell daily, it is sufficient for the artist that he describe such a life. Ages of Security and Anxiety look much alike to him.<sup>22</sup>

Wilder's religious vision can be defined as a blending of Christianity, western philosophy, Gertrude Stein, Kierkegaard as well as the Greek Classics. As Haberman finds, his vision is a combination "of Gertrude Stein's cooking pots, of Goethe's reading of the Iliad, or Kierkegaard's understanding of the stories of Job and Abraham and Isaac."<sup>23</sup>

In Wilder's mytho-religious vision, myth is another central term. Obviously, in myths of the past and present, he finds a perfect objective

correlative to his world view. Myths not only underscore his concept of living but also subscribe to his notion of man's relation to the Unknowable or the divine. Furthermore, myths also fit well in his idea of the totality of human experience. Wilder is neither a system builder nor even a philosopher. His sole concern is the study of human nature and its story. While describing human nature, he concentrates chiefly on man's moral and religious actions. That is why, Thornton presents himself more in the garb of a moralizer than anything else. Therefore his chief intention is to write a work of moral nature. However, his moral ideas, frequently clash with his mundane experiences. As for his moral intentions, he explains his idea to the Paris Review interviewer:

All the greatest dramatists, except the very greatest one, have precisely employed the stage to convey a moral or religious point of view concerning the action...

I get around this difficulty by what may be an impertinence on my part. By believing that the moralizing intention resided in the authors as a convention of their times – usually, a social convention so deeply buried in the author's mode of thinking that it seemed to him to be inseparable from creation... I say they injected a didactic intension in order to justify to themselves and to their audiences the exhibition of pure experience.<sup>24</sup>

According to Wilder, theatre is the proper place where he can effectively and precisely arrange his physical and emotional experiences. He also believes that his didactic intentions can be reconciled with the ordinary experiences, only with the help of myths. Wilder thinks that it is only through myths that the elements of supernatural and the incredible, can be blended with the day-to-day experiences of humanity. In his introduction to Richard Beer – Hofmann's Jaakobs Traum, Wilder goes on to explain this idea:

A myth passing from oral tradition into literature, moves most congenially into poetry and particularly into the poetic drama. Even the most rationalistic reader consents to receive as given the elements of the supernatural and the incredible that are involved in these ancient stories. Their validity rests on the general ideas they contain... The characters whom we have endowed with the life of significant ideas must be endowed with a different kind of life from the realistic – that of the recognizable quotidian.<sup>25</sup>

Though myths are central to human experience, they cannot be used in their old forms. As Wilder thinks, myths can be used in a modified form, only by relating them to the common experience of daily living. He does not accept the anthropological explanation of myths. Nor does he pay attention to their psychological content. He accepts only the artistic explanation, which regards myths as the instruments of the individual and racial self-knowledge. For Thornton, myths are important in as much as they raise questions of existence without answering them. The real purpose of myths, according to Wilder, is the exposition of the nature of mind and its struggle for self-knowledge.

However, before we go on to discuss Wilder's treatment of myths, we should develop a working, if not the precise, idea of myth and its functions. The Compact Oxford Reference Dictionary defines myth as a, "traditional story concerning the early history of a people or explaining a natural or social fact."<sup>26</sup> On his part, Wilder defines myth in poetic terms. In an essay on Joyce, he interprets it as, "the dreaming soul of the race telling its story."<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, he writes that the, "retelling of them on every hand occurs because they whisper a validation – they isolate and confer a significance."<sup>28</sup>

In the opinion of Wilder, myths have to perform specific, social, metaphysical, religious, and spiritual functions like, promoting social solidarity, underscoring the element of continuity, strengthening the mystical vein, intensifying religious feeling, and augmenting spiritual energy, embodied in religion, especially Christianity. As for its social function David Bidney in Myth and Literature writes that myths are, "to promote social solidarity as well as solidarity with nature as a whole in a time of social crisis."<sup>29</sup> Bidney adds that myth also emphasizes unity and continuity of human existence. "Mythical thought is especially concerned to deny and negate the fact of death and to affirm the unbroken unity and continuity of life."<sup>30</sup>

For Wilder, myths are also the instruments of philosophy and mystical experiences. John Frey, in Journal of English and Germanic Philosophy clearly underlines his [Wilder's] metaphysical predilection. Another critic, Warren French, in the introduction to A Vast Landscape: Time in the Novels of Thornton Wilder, mentions the centrality of metaphysical qualities in Wilder's writings. "The only way," French states, "we are ever going to respond adequately to Wilder's work is to accept his vision as mystical and to attempt to share it; yet the mystical qualities of his vision have rarely been acknowledged and often deliberately avoided."<sup>31</sup>

Yet another function of myths for Wilder is to tap the pervasive religious feeling and to reinforce spiritual energy. It is, therefore, no wonder that Wilder spent his entire career in reviving myths. However, it is erroneous to suppose that Wilder revives only ancient myths. In reality, he is as attentive

to the myths of modern literature as well as to the myths of antiquity. Wilder uses not only the myths, created by modern writers like Joyce, Pound, Eliot et al., but also the myths, developed by him. Interestingly, he transforms history into mythical patterns. As for the myths, created by other writers, we can take an instance from the myth embodied in The Merchant of Yonkers. As Haberman writes, it, "is not a real myth either, but since its story is based on other works of literature, it is regarded by Wilder as a kind of myth. He, like Pound and Eliot, uses the writings of others as though they were part of the great body of ideas available to the entire human group, or in other words a myth."<sup>32</sup>

As for Wilder's own myths, we can refer to his story of Emily's return from the dead, which is not at all a classical myth. It is a myth which Wilder has used earlier in The Woman of Andros. Likewise, we can find Wilder's employment of the historical myth in The Skin of Our Teeth. "The entire play," writes Haberman, "is provided with coherence and additional meaning by its use of what Wilder would call a recent retelling of a myth, of many myths, Finnegans Wake."<sup>33</sup> It is, as Haberman writes elsewhere, "a myth of the historical and cultural environment which created America."<sup>34</sup> For the American myth, Thornton is greatly indebted to Joyce's Finnegans Wake. In short, Wilder relies upon classical, historical, contemporary, and personal myths to give a concrete shape to his religious vision.

As mentioned earlier, Wilder introduces historical and classical myths, not in their ancient form but only in the form rendered by the philosophy of

Kierkegaard. For instance, while using the historical myth of Caesar in The Ides of March, he invests it with the existentialist elements of fear and awe. In the book, Wilder raises the question of human action. "Do man's actions indeed depend on God, or are they meaningless movements in a void?"<sup>35</sup> However, Wilder does not confine himself only to the mystery of human action but also goes on to emphasize the elements of fear and awe which, according to him, are instrumental in underscoring the existence of the Unknowable. Furthermore, Wilder goes on to relate one myth with other myths, or to be precise, historical myths with their classical counterparts. As an instance we can see how he links Caesar's difficulties with those of Hercules in The Alcestiad. Besides, one can mark a correlation between the doubts of Caesar and Hercules.

In The Alcestiad, Wilder provides us with a consummate example of classical myth, interpreted in terms of Kierkegaard. It is consummate in the sense that it deals with almost all the problems of human existence: doubt, living, love, faith, pain, renunciation, sacrifice, human-divine relation, etc. After Alcestis' death when Hercules arrives after killing the Hydra, he is overwhelmed with a sense of doubt about his descent from Zeus as well as the contributions of God in his achievement. This sense of doubt develops in him two contradictory feelings of pride as well as fear and trembling. He feels proud concluding that he must be a good man to have killed the Hydra. But at the same time, he becomes the victim of fear and trembling as well as he begins to think that his work is meaningless, since God has no part in it. Thus,

by introducing the contradictory elements, Wilder builds a complex situation to focus our attention to such central questions of human experience as the intersection of divine power in human action. Subsequently he goes on to pose a mighty question, whether human action is related to divinity or it is only an accident. From this action, like Kierkegaard, Wilder demands submission in fear and trembling, since in doing so one gains a lot. For Kierkegaard, loss is not loss, but in reality, the gain of everything lost earlier. Naturally in his effort to return Alcestis from death, Hercules regains his earlier faith in God. As he calls upon Apollo for new strength, he recognizes his dependence on God and with it, he comes to understand that God and man act in unison. Hercules' realization makes him an embodiment of humanity and divinity. He reminds us of Jesus Christ, who is totally divine and totally human at one and the same time.

However, this shift from doubt to faith is not properly dramatized. Wilder faces the same problem which T.S. Eliot raised in Murder in the Cathedral. In the play Eliot fails to dramatize Becket's struggle between doubt and faith and its subsequent resolution. The struggle between doubt and faith is not the only problem. There is yet another problem which involves the contradictory questions of renunciation and love for life. Kierkegaard believes that there is a precondition to faith. This precondition can be defined as "infinite resignation" i.e. the renunciation of everything, dearest in the world. But this resignation must not deny one's delight in life and living. As



Kierkegaard, wrote, the "secret in life is that everyone must sew [the shirt of infinite resignation] ... for himself."<sup>36</sup>

In the myth of Alcestis Wilder dramatizes the paradoxical relationship between humanity and divinity. He shows how in the moments of anger, Hercules asserts his humanity. He dramatizes the way Hercules is moved to a terrible anger after learning of Alcestis' death. He is enraged because of the concealment of the death of his beloved. He goes on to shout:

I am not a man, since my best friend [Admetus] will not treat me as a man... if I am not fit to share the grief of my friends... For you, I am an animal, a stupid animal who goes about killing animals! you think I have no mind or heart or soul.<sup>37</sup>

For the sake of his platonic love for Alcestis, Hercules relinquishes all that is dear to him in the world. He risks even his life, but later he regains everything, including his faith in life which he had risked earlier. This recovery is possible only with the renunciation of his relationship with God. Subsequently, Wilder goes on to tell that faith can also resolve another paradox, the pain of God's love. In his opinion, it is love that can bridge the gulf between humanity and divinity. While humanity is the symbol of finitude, divinity is that of infinitude. In the play, since Alcestis refuses to recognize the necessity for the finite, she becomes a victim of Kierkegaard's despair. Likewise, Hercules is also frightened of his relationship with the infinite. Alcestis thinks that there is no meaning in life. She does not even recognize God's love for man. "Alcestis' fear that life is a 'passionate nonsense,'" writes Haberman, "is exactly the cry of the fantastic religious individual. She must

learn to become herself, to return to herself – in Finitude.”<sup>38</sup> In order to emphasize this point, Wilder introduces the story of the four herdsmen, who represent Apollo’s four attributes: Healer, Singer, Pathfinder, and the harbinger of light. These herdsmen bear witness to God’s incarnation in the lowly men. At the same time they teach her the way she may regain her self. By this example, Alcestis learns the way and the value of daily living, or finitude. She also goes on to learn that love is the way that can unite man and God.

After dramatizing the meaning of love, Wilder enacts the meaning of life revealed in living. Nevertheless, life must not be lived, in the belief that it is a mere passage to something better. It must be lived with a sense of Kierkegaardian dread i.e. with a daily awareness of its possibility. This paradoxical nature of life is dramatized through despair, felt by Alcestis. She regards life meaningless because in her desire to understand God, she has averted herself from living. However, her love for her husband Admetus, brings in her an awareness of the impermanence of life. This feeling produces in her a terrible sorrow, which goes on to increase tremendously the sense of the value of life. For the sake of her love for husband, she develops a spirit of infinite resignation which can be interpreted only in terms of Kierkegaard who observes:

For it is great to give up one’s wish, but it is greater to hold it fast after having given it up, it is great to grasp the eternal, but it greater to hold fast to the temporal after having given it up.<sup>39</sup>

In her desire to die, Alcestis becomes more strongly attached to life:

I hate to die... I must die from Admetus. I must die from my children. I must die from this sunlight.<sup>40</sup>

However, as Alcestis believes, her sacrifice must be inspired not by another thing but only by love. She also knows that her overwhelming love for Admetus, symbolizes only her love for life. Thus her sacrifice of life for the sake of love goes on to bridge the gulf between God and man. Obviously the element of love invariably involves the element of sorrow. According to Haberman, "Alcestis' sacrifice, then, made in joy, essentially to create joy, carries with it the burden of potential sorrow – the sorrow of those who love her..."<sup>41</sup>

With the help of the myth of Alcestis, Wilder reinterprets the larger role of death in human life by associating it with living. He believes that living and dying are correlated with each other. At the same time, he emphasizes the role of Despair in the process of recognition. Thus we can see that Wilder arrives at his mytho-religious vision by interpreting the myth of Alcestis in terms of Kierkegaard, who highlights the basic absurdity of man's relation to the universe, the leap of faith, and acknowledgement of the role of dread in life.

To recapitulate, Thornton Wilder's mytho-religious vision is the product of his determination to maintain spiritual identity in an indifferent universe that is hostile to religious interests. For the purpose, he recovers the spiritual elements of the ancient world, including its great religious and mythic themes, especially Christian themes and acclimatizes them to the contemporary human

condition. He eventually goes on to express this vision through different literary modes, fictional and non-fictional.

In Thornton's vision, religion and myth occupy the central stage. As for religion he does not interpret it in sectarian terms but in exclusively secular terms. Though he adheres to Christianity, he does not highlight so much its revealed and historical elements as its ethical and spiritual values. For his emphasis on the spiritual elements, he is known as a religious Platonist. But obviously, Wilder is a humanist who attempts to reconcile two different forms of humanism, the New Humanism and the Religious or Christian Humanism. As a humanist, Wilder has a close kinship with Whitman and his personalism. As for myths, Thornton uses various forms of ancient and modern myths to give a concrete form to his religious vision. He makes an exemplary use of Roman as well as Greek myths, interpreting them in modern terms of the existentialist philosophy.

As for Wilder's Mytho-Religious vision, we can mark two different stages in Thornton's mytho-religious vision. In the early stage, his vision is purely Christian, or to be precise, Protestant with a little bit of Catholic symbolism and Greek humanism. This vision was the result of his family background, education, and early social contacts. But his later vision is reinforced by the religious views of Gertrude Stein and Soren Kierkegaard. Wilder's early vision is embodied in The Angel That Troubled the Waters, The Bridge of San Luis Rey, The Woman of Andros, The Trumpet Shall Sound, The Long Christmas Dinner, Our Town, etc. His later or more developed

vision is embodied in such books as The Merchant of Yonkers, The Skin of Our Teeth, and Heaven's My Destination. However, its best exemplification comes in The Ides of March, which is based on the historical myth of Julius Caesar and The Alcestiad, based on the Greek myth of Alcestis. In these books, Wilder goes on to incorporate Kierkegaardian elements like the basic absurdity of man's relation to the universe, the leap of faith, and the acknowledgement of the role of dread in human life.

## Chapter 2 – Notes

<sup>1</sup>Michael J. Vivion, "Wilder Thornton," "Sidelights," Contemporary Authors. New Revision Series, Volume 40 (n.p.) 477: hereafter the article cited as Vivion and the book as Contemporary Authors.

<sup>2</sup>Hermann Stresau, "Wilder Thornton," Contemporary Literary Criticism, Vol.15, eds. Sharon R. Gunton and Laurie Lanzen Harris, (Detroit, Michigan: Gale Research Company Book Tower, 1980) 574: hereafter the article cited as Hermann Stresau and the book as Literary Criticism with vol.

<sup>3</sup>Robert W. Corrigan, "Wilder Thornton, 1897" Contemporary Literary Criticism, Vol. 5, eds. Carolyn Riley and Phyllis Carmel Mendelson (n.p.) 495: hereafter the article cited as Corrigan and the book as Contemporary Literary Criticism.

<sup>4</sup>Hermann Stresau 574.

<sup>5</sup>Francis Fergusson, The Humane Image in Dramatic Literature (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1957) 51: hereafter cited as Fergusson.

<sup>6</sup>Eliot qtd. Rex Burbank, Thornton Wilder (Boston: Twayne Publisher, 1961) 28-29: hereafter cited as Burbank.

<sup>7</sup>Burbank 29.

<sup>8</sup>Burbank 29.

<sup>9</sup>Wilder qtd Burbank 21.

<sup>10</sup>Burbank 24.

<sup>11</sup>Burbank 25.

<sup>12</sup>Donald Haberman, The Plays of Thornton Wilder (Middle Town Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1967) 33: hereafter cited as Haberman.

<sup>13</sup>Thornton Wilder, Pullman Car Hiawatha, The Long Christmas Dinner and Other Plays in One Act (New York: Harper and Row, 1959) 62: hereafter the play cited as Hiawatha with paginations.

<sup>14</sup>Thornton Wilder, Three Plays: Our Town, The Skin of Our Teeth, The Matchmaker (New York: Harper and Row, 1957) 249: hereafter the play cited as The Skin of Our Teeth with paginations.

<sup>15</sup>Our Town 45.

<sup>16</sup>Thornton Wilder qtd. Haberman 38.

<sup>17</sup>Haberman 38.

<sup>18</sup>Wilder qtd. Haberman 41.

<sup>19</sup>Wilder qtd. Haberman 41.

<sup>20</sup>Wilder qtd. Haberman 40.

<sup>21</sup>Wilder qtd. Haberman 40.

<sup>22</sup>Wilder qtd. Haberman 52.

<sup>23</sup>Haberman 52.

<sup>24</sup>Wilder qtd. Haberman 115.

<sup>25</sup>Wilder qtd. Haberman 116

<sup>26</sup>Compact Oxford Reference Dictionary ed. Catherine Soanes, 2001 edition, 577.

<sup>27</sup>Wilder qtd. Haberman 117.

<sup>28</sup>Wilder qtd. Haberman 117.

<sup>29</sup>David Bidney qtd. Vivion 477

<sup>30</sup>Bidney, qtd. Vivion Contemporary Authors 477.

<sup>31</sup>French qtd. Vivion, Contemporary Authors 477.

<sup>32</sup>Haberman 117.

- <sup>33</sup>Haberman 117.
- <sup>34</sup>Haberman 120.
- <sup>35</sup>Haberman 41
- <sup>36</sup>Kierkegaard qtd. Haberman 43.
- <sup>37</sup>Wilder qtd. Haberman 43.
- <sup>38</sup>Haberman 47.
- <sup>39</sup>Kierkegaard qtd. Haberman 48.
- <sup>40</sup>Wilder qtd. Haberman 48.
- <sup>41</sup>Haberman 49.



# CHAPTER 3

## MYTHO-RELIGIOUS VISION IN THE PLAYS OF THORNTON WILDER

As mentioned in the second chapter, Thornton's mytho-religious vision marks two different stages. While the first stage embodies his religious and humanistic ideas, the second deals with the ideas received from Gertrude Stein and Soren Kierkegaard. In this chapter, we have to see how these ideas prefigure in his full length plays, like Our Town (1938), The Skin of Our Teeth (1942), The Matchmaker (1955), and The Alcestiad (1960). Whereas the first three plays incorporate the characteristic tendencies of the first phase, the last one articulates the central elements of Stein and Kierkegaard. Obviously, Our Town, The Skin of Our Teeth, and The Matchmaker deal with the ordinary American life which invariably hides the moral and religious values of universal human life. However, on a deeper level, these plays bring out the relationship between Americans and Destiny. As Wilder goes on to project ordinary American life in a metaphysical framework, he successfully creates the eternal rhythms of human life. By doing so he underscores the elements of continuity and divinity of human action that are central to Wilder's aesthetic vision.

In Our Town, Wilder's central theme is the trivialities of the American life. In a letter to Edmund Wilson, dated, January 31, 1938, Wilder uses the

phase, "columns of perspective on the trivialities of Daily Life"<sup>1</sup> to denote his purpose of writing the play. He lays down the scenes of the play in a pastoral setting, involving the ordinary events in the lives of the ordinary people, living in a new Hampshire village, Grover's Corners. He makes, "an attempt to find a value above all price for the smallest events of our daily life."<sup>2</sup> Wilder unfolds not only the human reality, but also the non-human reality around, believing that the ordinary events of human life possess priceless value, which can be recovered in the moments of success as well as failure. However, he finds that the people are not aware of their real value, since they seldom penetrate beneath or above the surface of life and thus fail to realize the importance of ordinary experience. According to Rex Burbank, it is this failure which energizes the inner conflict in Our Town. "Unaware of the value of life," writes Burbank, "the people of Grover's Corners live their lives banally and seldom get beneath or above the surface of life. Yet even what they do realize and experience is beyond price; and this is the paradox that pervades the play and is the source of its tension. The conflict is basically inner, between consciousness and unconsciousness or between awareness and appreciation of life and insensibility and self-preoccupation."<sup>3</sup>

The action of the play covers a period between 1901 to 1913. It portrays the routine of daily life as well as the major events in the lives of George Gibbs and Emily Webb and their families. Besides the members of these families, it also includes such ordinary characters as the milkman, the constable, and the paperboy. Our Town has three acts covering the totality of quotidian life,

including childhood, love, and marriage, and death. In Act I, Wilder shows a complete day in the town in which George and Emily grow up in the Webb and Gibbs households. In the Acts II and III, he introduces family scenes as well the everyday street scenes, to enact the courtship and marriage of George and Emily, and Emily's death. Apart from this courtship, marriage, and death, Wilder also provides us with such important facts as the history of the town and the ordinary activities of the ordinary people.

To elaborate, in Act-I, called the "Daily Life," Wilder portrays the buildings of the town one by one and introduces Gibbs and Webbs as figures in a typical folk painting. They are presented as ordinary people, neither important nor unimportant, as people of the town and the universe, absorbing and emblemizing social and cosmic concerns. After Gibbs and Webbs, Wilder through his stage manager focuses our attention on Professor Willard and his lecture on the natural history of the town. After a survey of the social and political life of the town, the act closes with a typical letter with an interesting address on the envelope:

the United States of America; Continent of North America;  
Western Hemisphere; the Earth; the Solar System; the Universe;  
the Mind of God.<sup>4</sup>

According to David Castronovo, the address exemplifies Wilder's way, of practicing the craft of the folk-painter. He lays bare before us the natural scenes including the hills and firmament as well as persons, their feelings and their ideas. "Act one, in its multifariousness and plenitude," writes

Castronovo, "stands as a kind of celebratory offering to the universe, a playwright's highly colored, two-dimensional rendering of living."<sup>5</sup>

Act II is titled "Love and Marriage," and takes place in 1904. It deals with, as stated earlier, with the courtship and marriage of Emily and George. It shows Emily's liking for George as well as her usual doubts about his self-centered nature and her belief about his capacity for remorse and development. Wilder also enacts George's motivation for redirecting his life and his decision to stay in Grover's Corners:

I think that once you've found a person that you're very fond of ... I mean a person who's fond of you, too, and likes you enough to be interested in your character... Well, I think that's just as important as college is, and even more so.

(Our Town 68)

Without taking recourse to ambivalences, and without dramatizing social complications and disturbances, Wilder paints the primary colours of human love. However, he does not hesitate to underscore the element of black terror, which seizes the mind of George before the wedding ceremony. Painfully aware of the pressures and anxieties of getting married, he begins to cry. Likewise, Emily is also seized by doubts. Even though such feelings of pressures and doubts are outdated, they eventually help Wilder to dramatize the dilemma of love and marriage in cosmic terms. By emphasizing these elements, Wilder rises above time and place and achieves cosmic dimensions, bringing in an element of Destiny. United in marriage George and Emily become two more acceptors of a Destiny that connects them with humanity at

large. Wilder's treatment of marriage is not romantic but realistic. Marriage for him is only a chain in the design of the human sequence: "The cottage, the go-cart, the Sunday-afternoon drives in the Ford, the first rheumatism, the grandchildren, the second rheumatism, the deathbed, the reading of the will (Our Town 78).

Act III is an, "Act in Eternity." It deals with the ultimate fate of Emily i.e. her death. Emily's death as also the death of Mrs. Gibbs and some lesser characters are portrayed in the context of the quotidian experience. Emily, newly arrived in the grave-yard on the hill, refuses to accept her fate and yearns to return to her previous life. Interestingly, Emily is present at her own burial and speaks with the deceased. But she is still uneasy and nervous, as she has not achieved poise and detachment of the other deceased. Though the dead have gained great peace without losing their identity, they still have interest in some things belonging to their erstwhile earthly existence. For instance, one of them likes to hear church hymns. Besides, there is one, Mrs. Soames, who sees a stunt in all familiar events. She is still receptive to the element of stunt even in the burial of the deceased. On her part, Emily begins to realize something, she never realized before i.e. how troubled and how... in the dark, persons live? However, Emily is not able to renounce life entirely, as she has not yet gained patience and detachment. She still longs for the festivity of life, full of human warmth and great earthly radiance. She still earnestly desires to return to her former life for the sake of everyday things and the great sympathetic and consuming human love. Nevertheless, in the end, she comes to realize that

absorption in everyday life does not allow man to share in the true living.

Naturally after her renewed earthly experience, she comes to conclude:

That's all human beings are! – Just blind people... That's what it was to be alive. To move about in a cloud of ignorance; to go up and down trampling on the feelings of those... of those about you. To spend and waste time as though you had a million years. To be always at the mercy of one self-centered passion, or another.

(Our Town 101)

The story of the play, though simple on the surface, cuts deeper. Under the garb of simplicity, it highlights great metaphysical truths. Wilder enunciates these truths only step by step from different spatio-temporal perspectives. He goes on to extend these truths with each act. In the end, he comes to underscore the significance of the seemingly simple reality. Emphasizing this point, Burbank observes: "By relating the ordinary events in the lives of these ordinary people to a metaphysical framework that broadens with each act, he is able to portray life as being at once significant and trivial, noble and absurd, miraculous and humdrum."<sup>6</sup>

Besides metaphysical truths, Wilder highlights social problems, like injustice and inequality. But he treats all the problems, whether metaphysical or social, in terms of commonplace experience. He treats even the theme of death, without its usual horror. But with the literary trick of repetition, he transforms the ordinary experiences into a ritual. Furthermore, Wilder demonstrates his uncanny literary ability to make the ordinary interesting and to bring out its intrinsic value without degenerating into bathos. He skilfully exploits the larger meaning of the events to heighten suspense.

In Our Town, Wilder emphasizes ordinariness to underscore extraordinariness. To achieve his aim, he introduces common people, who are described by Gertude Stein as the "valley-born and the hill-bounded."<sup>7</sup> These people are localized in their thinking, since they are extremely confined to their native place. They are neither interested to get out of their territory nor they are concerned with the abstract question of life such as temperance, social equality, culture, and beauty. They are attentive only to the trivialities of human nature. It is only in these trivialities that they seek the guiding principles of their lives. No wonder that in their enlarged form they become the embodiment of, "the eternal rhythms of life; but in Acts II and III they become objective correlatives for humanistic and theological perspectives."<sup>8</sup> For instance, in Act II, "the love and marriage of George and Emily symbolize the universal rite uniting nature's physical and spiritual forces; and, in Act III, Emily's death and brief return to life represent the apotheosis of life in its spiritual essence for which the speech by Rebecca at the close of Act I is a preparation. In addition, the scenes present an increasingly broad perspective of time and space. Act I, up to the time of the key passage by Rebecca, deals with the town in relation to its own history and geography; Act II, with the relationship between the wedding and the history and aspirations of Mankind in all ages; and Act III, with the relationship between life and eternity."<sup>9</sup>

Wilder presents his characters not merely as "objective correlatives" of his humanistic and religious ideas but also as specimens of perfection produced by nature. Wilder attempts to draw the, "parallel between physical nature and

human nature."<sup>10</sup> He goes on to underscore how nature attempts to produce a perfect human being. Wilder affirms the dual nature of man, the higher and the lower. This duality of nature is exemplified by human will, which aspires for perfection. It is this will which energizes Emily and George:

EMILY:

I always expect a man to be perfect and I think he should be.

GEORGE:

Oh... I don't think it's possible to be perfect, Emily.

EMILY:

Well, my father is, and as far as I can see your father is. There's no reason on earth why you shouldn't be, too.

GEORGE:

Well, I feel it's the other way round. That men aren't naturally good; but girls are.

(Our Town 63)

Wilder highlights nature's different roles and purposes. He frequently takes recourse to symbolism. In Our Town, Wilder's central symbol is wedding, through which he depicts physical and spiritual purposes of nature. However, he does not express these purposes in secular terms, but prefers to articulate them in a religious context. At the same time Wilder does not forget to mention the elements of misery and pain that often intrude in human life. It is these elements, which put a questionmark before the value of the wedding. He expresses this sense of apprehension in the words of the Stage Manager:

I've married over two hundred couples in my day. Do I believe in it? I don't know.

(Our Town 78)



Besides wedding, Wilder takes up the theme of Death, which symbolizes the end of life. This theme finds expression in the third Act, which embodies Emily's confusion about life and death. The dead Emily, while observing her own funeral, is reluctant to quit life. She begs to be allowed to relive one day of her life, her twelfth birthday. As the Stage Manager permits her, she takes part once more in daily events of life. Eventually, she recovers for the time being the awe and wonder of the earthly existence. But ultimately she begins to cry, "Oh, earth you're too wonderful for anybody to realize you" (Our Town 100).

Act III presents the Dead, seated on one side of the stage and the scenes of daily life, taking place on the other. These scenes include the funeral scene as well. The scene is invariably connected with the chill of death. Throughout the scene, Wilder alternates the two contradictory feelings, the chill of death and the emotional intensity of life. These elements find their best expression in Emily's utterances to her mother:

Oh, Mama, just look at me one minute as though you really saw me. Mama, fourteen years have gone by. I'm dead. You're a grandmother, Mama. I married George Gibbs. Mama. Wally's dead, too. Mama, his appendix burst on a camping trip to North Conway. We felt just terrible about it – don't you remember? But, just for a moment now we're all together. Mama, just for a moment we're happy. Let's look at one another.

(Our Town 99)

In the play Wilder sets the events of daily life, in a wider context. He presents them as the moments of life set against eternity. He goes on to contrast vibrant life with its usual elements of joy and grief, happiness and

suffering to the passionless chill of death. Emily is in a position to visualize life from these contrasting angles. She can see life from the point of eternity as well as from that of the living human being. Since she is dead, she has the experience of the other world in which the dead live. She is also fortunate to have the experience of the living people, for she has been allowed to relive her twelfth birthday of the earthly existence. While reliving, she comes to realize the agonies of life, especially the failure to experience the full intensity of each moment good or bad through the pain of the consciousness of love. Thus, Emily's attempt to relive her twelfth birthday terminates in futility. With this agonizing realization, she returns to the realm of the Dead, where the moment of intensity and human passions have no meaning. In the end, Emily discovers that all things in life, including tragic waste, blindness, ignorance, the realization of the values of routine matters etc. are precious gifts.

Interestingly, Wilder invests Emily's experience of discovery with a sense of mystical significance provided by the presence of the dead who have become indifferent to life on earth. Simon Stimson, Mrs. Soames, Mr. Carter, and Mrs. Gibbs are no more concerned with their earthly experience. Nevertheless they still retain their sense of identity. They intend to lose their earthly experience or their identity only in the Mind of God. As the Stage Manager states at the opening of the act:

They're waitin'. They're waitin' for something that they feel is comin'. Something important, and great. Aren't they waitin' for the eternal part in them to come out clear?

Some of the things they're going to say maybe'll hurt your feelings – but that's the way it is: mother'n daughter... husband'n wife... enemy'n enemy... money'n miser... all those terribly important things kind of grow pale around her. And what's left when memory's gone, and your identity, Mrs. Smith?

(Our Town 82)

Obviously, Wilder dramatizes the experiences of daily life and eternity in mythic terms. He evokes the central myth of microcosm and macrocosm. The little New Hampshire town of Grover's Corners is the microcosm of the universal forces, represented by the external forces of Time, Nature, and Death and the internal forces, represented by Instinct, Love, Despair, and Apathy. The hero of the universal drama is invariably the Human Life. The scenes of this drama enact the events of daily life, viz. love, marriage, and the burial of the dead. These events represent the psychological life of man and women in all times and places. They display the significance as well as the insignificance of the hopes and aspirations, the customs and habits, the happiness and misery of human life.

Eventually Wilder, while presenting the mythic vision of American life, brings out the triviality and importance of human life. Seen through the prism of eternity, human life is trivial. But seen through the multicoloured glass of daily life, it is important in as much as it serves us as a microcosm of the universal life. In this aspect, life is much more valuable, and is a precious gift from God, neither to be wasted nor to be valued cynically. Human Life has intrinsic value and pertains to a moral order. Wilder's insistence on beauty, love, and moral order has its source in his Christianity, which forms the central

core of his early mytho-religious vision. These elements are best exemplified by Emily's speech to her mother in which she begs Mrs. Webb to look at her with love. The moral order of love, dramatized by Wilder, has a mystical basis, which he borrowed from Dante. Like Dante, Wilder wants to show that love which energizes life and provides meaning to it, is a manifestation of the cosmological order of things.

Wilder's approach to mysticism is not romantic but classical. In romantic mysticism, the divine love is substituted for human love but in classical mysticism, as represented by Dante, human love is not substituted but enlarged into divine love. Wilder on his part goes on to enlarge the scope of human consciousness. He also shows the disparity between the real value of life and the one of which characters are aware. He is not so much after the result of the action as after the failure to realize the value of life which essentially signifies the failure to love each and every moment of life.

Evidently, Our Town is a celebration of life, the celebration of the simplest and the modest events of life with a sense of religious sensitivity, a celebration that connects the New England village with the universe. It is a celebration in which the New England village life becomes the symbol of, "the Everywhere, and the Always."<sup>11</sup> This vision is invariably related to Whitman's ideal of an America as a nation of nations; as a champion of a transcendent view of the individual; and as the representative of the human nature, embodied in the collective human mind. "In making," writes Rex Burbank, "the little American town a mythical representation of civilized human life

everywhere in all ages, he accomplished what he and Gertrude Stein conceived to be the main achievement of the literary masterpiece- the use of the materials of human nature to portray the eternal and universal residing in the collective 'human mind.' The theatricalist mode of presentation is so closely woven with the themes that it is an expression of them; and one feels compelled to say that Our Town could not have succeeded by any other means."<sup>12</sup>

Thornton Wilder continues with the theme of the celebration of American life as the representative of universal human life in The Skin of Our Teeth as well. However, in order to provide more profundity to the celebration, he introduces more philosophical and religious dimensions. Philosophically, he makes a determined effort to resist "the tyranny of naturalism"<sup>13</sup> by expressing his unshakable faith in and affection for humanity. At the same time, he echoes the idea of nothingness, as found in the existential philosophy. However, more than anything else, his central theme is the ability of the human race, despite natural disasters and man's own catastrophic folly, ignorance, cruelty, in difference, and cowardice, "to survive – and somehow, for all its readiness to forfeit all it has gained, to inch ahead of where it formerly stood."<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, as Thornton pleads, human survival depends upon man's, "adherence to a set of ethical values conveniently framed for him by Hebrew prophets, Greek philosophers, and Judaic-Christian synthesizers..."<sup>15</sup> Surprisingly, Wilder tends to overlook the ethical values of thinkers belonging to other contemporary regions and traditions that are so vital for survival in the modern world. It is no wonder that Wilder's hero

George Antrobus remains only a compound of Amos Wilder, Thomas Edison, Henry Ford, Theodore Roosevelt, and Warren Harding, without partaking anything of Gandhi, Juarez, and Lening.

In The Skin of Our Teeth, Wilder reworks the history of the human race in the light of Joyce's Finnegans Wake and the crisis atmosphere of World War II. He depicts five thousand years in the lives of George and Maggie Antrobus who live in the suburban New Jersey with their children Gladys, and Henry, and their maid Sabina. The play in its three acts, dramatizes their suffering, through cataclysms of flood, famine, ice, and war. The first Act pits Man against Nature, the second, Man against the Moral Order, and the third, Man against his own Self. The play encompasses three different time scales: the first Act, geologic time; the second, biblical time; and the third, the time of recorded history. As for the story, the three acts dramatize the lives of the Antrobuses, who represent, at one and the same time, the typical American family as also the Human Family. "[t]hey relive the whole history of the human race, its origin, its fight for survival against natural catastrophe, its fall and redemption, and its wars."<sup>16</sup>

The characters of the drama are cast in the biblical mode. While Antrobus represents Adam and the eternal Male, Mrs. Antrobus represents Eve and the eternal Female. Much in the same way their son Henry stands for Cain and their daughter Gladys, for the future prospects of the human race. Likewise, the maid Sabina goes on to represent Lilith or evil. The story of the

play begins with Antrobus who has made his way up "from next to nothing."<sup>17</sup>

To quote from the text of the play:

Mr. Antrobus, himself. He comes of very old stock and has made his way up from next to nothing.

It is reported that he was once a gardener, but left that situation under circumstances that have been variously reported. Mr. Antrobus is a veteran of foreign wars, and bears a number of scars, front and back.

(The Skin of Our Teeth 111)

Mr. Antrobus is not only a great soldier but also a great inventor. He has invented the wheel, has made great progress with the multiplication table, and at present is working out the alphabet. Besides, he is a devoted husband and an affectionate father, "a pillar of the church, and has all the best interests of the community at heart" (The Skin of Our Teeth 112). However, Mrs. Antrobus has no interest in any of these things. She is devoted only to the progress of her children. As Wilder writes:

Mrs. Antrobus is as fine a woman as you could hope to see. She lives only for her children; and if it would be any benefit to her children she'd see the rest of us stretched out dead at her feet without turning a hair, - that's the truth. If you want to know anything more about Mrs. Antrobus, just go and look at a tigress, and look hard.

(The Skin of Our Teeth 113)

Henry is an extra-ordinary boy, more interested in evil-doing than in studies. But he remains, as Wilder mentions, a typical American boy:

Well, Henry Antrobus is a real, clean-cut American boy. He'll graduate from High School one of these days, if they make the alphabet any easier. - Henry, when he has a stone in his hand, has a perfect aim; he can hit anything

from a bird to an older brother - Oh! I didn't mean to say that! - but it certainly was an unfortunate accident, and it was very hard getting the police out of the house.

(The Skin of Our Teeth 113)

Gladys, who as mentioned earlier, embodies the best that Antrobus hopes for the future of the race. "She'll make some good man a good wife some day, it he'll just come down off the movie screen and ask her" (The Skin of Our Teeth 113). Sabina, a vain and discontented pessimist as well as an embodiment of evil, is a faint-hearted maid. Whenever things are running smoothly, she invites Antrobus to enjoy himself in her company. But, when she smells danger, she behaves like a coward, reducing herself to servility.

To resume the story, the Antrobus are threatened by a natural calamity, the glacier-invasion. With ice at their doors, they find their home disappearing before their eyes. Mrs. Antrobus does everything to protect her family. However, her husband remains busy as ever with his inventions, sending only a message of comfort to his family by the Telegraph Boy: "Burn everything except Shakespeare" (The Skin of Our Teeth 124). His message disappoints Mrs. Antrobus who mutters bitterly: "Men! - He knows I'd burn ten Shakespeares to prevent a child of mine from having one cold in the head" (The Skin of Our Teetch 124).

As the glacier encroaches, Antrobus arrives rolling in his newly invented wheel. In happiness, he cries: "we've reached the top of the wave. There's not much more to be done" (The Skin of Our Teeth 137). But Mrs. Antrobus reminds him that there is nothing to be happy, since their very life is



in danger. At this time, Mr. Antrobus brings Homer, the Muses, and Moses for protection under their roof. Mrs. Antrobus though initially reluctant grudgingly gives her consent on the condition that they should not bring their pets the dinosaur and the mammoth. Meanwhile, Mr. Antrobus is informed that Henry has been throwing stones and has probably killed the neighbour's boy. He becomes much disturbed. Mrs. Antrobus becomes alarmed at her husband's despair. She tries to comfort him by bringing forth the felicities of the domestic warmth. She also coaxes the Muses to sing. To comfort her father Gladys recites for him "The Star," a poem by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. She also shows her excellent report card, saying:

Look Papa, here's my report card. Look it. Conduct A!  
Look, Papa. Papa, do you want to hear the Star, by Henry  
Wads – worth Longfellow? Papa, you're not mad at me,  
are you? – I know it'll get warmer. Soon it'll be just like  
spring, and we can go to a picnic at the Hibernian Picnic  
Grounds like you always like to do, don't you remember?  
Papa, just look at me once.

(The Skin of Our Teeth 156)

Subsequently Antrobus regains his hope. As Mrs. Antrobus teaches Gladys the Bible and Sabina starts burning the chairs, he feverishly forces Henry to learn the multiplication table.

Act II enacts the idea of the world before the Flood. The action begins at Atlantic City, where a convention of the Honorable Order of Mammals, Subdivision Human, is being held. The convention is presided over by Mr. Antrobus who is as usual concerned with "the disasters of terrestrial life, the fact of his own sexuality, and the gnawing obligations of a father and

husband.”<sup>18</sup> As he goes on to review the past, he observes: “Little did my dear parents think, – when they told me to stand on my own two feet, – that I’d arrive at this place.”<sup>19</sup> While Mr. Antrobus reminds us of President Roosevelt, his wife Mrs. Antrobus resembles Eleanor Roosevelt with her simplified style. She, in her usual style, “bickers with the children, champions the idea of the family, and protests against Antrobus’s breaking of his marriage promise.”<sup>20</sup> The maid servant of Antrobus, Sabina appears in the guise of a beauty queen, charming hostess of Vingo-Parlour and the seductress of Mr. Antrobus.

The participants are not so much interested in their own affairs as with the games of chance, laughter, and lechery. The Fortune-Teller warns them of the coming Duluge. Intoxicated by his success and trapped by the wiles of Sabina, Mr. Antrobus asks his wife for divorce. But Mrs. Antrobus is as balanced as ever. She does not lose her essential prosaic nature. Naturally she bluntly refuses to give her husband a divorce, saying:

I didn’t marry you because you were perfect. I didn’t even marry you because I loved you. I married you because you gave me a promise.

She takes of her ring and looks at it.

That promise made up for your faults. And the promise I gave you made up for mine. Two imperfect people got married and it was the promise that made the marriage.

(The Skin of Our Teeth 200-201)

Recovering his sanity, Antrobus sees the folly about him with clear eyes. Meanwhile, Henry hits a coloured man with a stone and Gladys tries to imitate the garish style of the Hussies about her. Mr. Antrobus now sets his

mind to preserve the human race again. He asks his family to hurry up to their boat. As the tide rises, the Fortune-Teller calls after them: "Think it over! A new world to make. – think it over!"<sup>21</sup>

Act III deals with the effects of war, which has destroyed everything in sight and forced people to live underground. But there is peace again. Gladys has a baby and Mr. Antrobus, inspired by his books, begins to rebuild. The Act begins in the Antrobus's house. Sabina is again the maid, but she is dressed as a Napoleonic camp follower. The Act is dominated by an impasse between Antrobus – Adam and his son Henry Cain, the man who as a boy slew his brother and who is now the "representation of strong, unreconciled evil" (The Skin of Our Teeth 235). In the modern context, he represents the extreme form of individualism which in itself is no less than evil. When his father threatens him with a gun, he says:

Shoot me, I tell you. You don't have to think I'm any relation of yours. I haven't got any father or any mother, or brothers or sisters. And I don't want any. And what's more I haven't got anybody over me; and I never will have. I'm alone, and that's all I want to be: alone. So you can shoot me.

(The Skin of Our Teeth 235)

Expressing his despair, Mr. Antrobus replies:

you're the last person I wanted to see. The sight of you dries up all my plans and hopes. I wish I were back at war still, because it's easier to fight you than to live with you. War's a pleasure – do you hear me? – War's a pleasure compared to what faces us now: trying to build up a peacetime with you in the middle of it.

(The Skin of Our Teeth 236)

As Henry retorts that he is leaving the place in order to build "a world of free man," Antrobus throws down his gun. He tells Henry that he may be able to work with him. But Henry destroys his hope, as he does not want to work with his father. Mr. Antrobus challenges him and goes on to point out that he cannot do so till he understands the real meaning of liberty. In unambiguous terms, he tells his son:

How can you make a world for people to live in, unless you've first put order in yourself? Mark my words: I shall continue fighting you until my last breath as long as you mix up your idea of liberty with your idea of hogging everything for yourself. I shall have no pity on you. I shall pursue you to the far concerns of the earth. You and I want the same thing; but until you think of it as something that everyone has a right to, you are my deadly enemy and I will destroy.

(The Skin of Our Teeth 237)

Sabina or rather Miss Somerset tries to remove this impasse. Left to himself, Antrobus finds a way out in the memory of three things that enable him to believe in a new beginning. The first is the "voice of the people in their confusion and their need" (The Skin of Our Teeth 247). The second is the thought of his wife and the children and their house. The third is the thought of his books i.e. the legacy of ideas or the thoughts of the leaders of mankind.

Interestingly, the play ends with aphorisms of Spinoza, Plato, Aristotle, and the Bible. While, in his statement Spinoza points out the vanity of the common occurrences of daily life, Plato tells us about the ruler, who is required to establish order in himself, before assuming the role of the ruler. Much in the same way, the statement of Aristotle recalls the potential divinity of mankind. At the same time, the words, quoted from the Bible, urge man to

have staunch faith in God. The act ends with the statement of Sabina, who repeats her words, spoken at the beginning of the play:

Oh, oh, oh. Six o'clock and the master not home yet. Pray God nothing serious has happened to him crossing the Hudson River. But I wouldn't be surprised. The whole world's at sixes and sevens, and why the house hasn't fallen down about our ears long ago is a miracle to me.

She comes down to the footlights.

This is where you came in. We have to go on for ages and ages yet.

You go home.

The end of this play isn't written yet

Mr. and Mrs. Antrobus! Their heads are full of plans and they're as confident as the first day they began, – and they told me to tell you: good night.

(The Skin of Our Teeth 250)

The Skin of Our Teeth is a perfect "objective correlative" of Wilder's early mytho-religious vision. It incorporates his humanistic and ethical preoccupations, dramatized with the help of allegorical characters and themes. "The characters," writes Rex Burbank, "are all allegorical figures on three levels: as Americans, as biblical figures, and as universal human types. Antrobus – the middle-class American, Adam, and the 'father pilot' of the human race – has the general weaknesses and virtues of humanity in general of all times."<sup>22</sup> Thematically, all these characters are intrigued with the same problems, with the same disasters, the same inner conflicts, and the same efforts of the survival. They are concerned with the universal human instincts, humiliations, evils etc. Their daily lives hide as usual the key to the Destiny of human race, the idea which is central to Wilder.

Wilder's mytho-religious vision in The Skin of Our Teeth, still affirms to his humanistic affirmation. It embodies his faith in human values. This affirmation is exemplified by Gladys recitation of the opening lines of Genesis. It is also confirmed by Sabina who urges the audience to save the human race. The survival, as Wilder tells us in the first Act, is "a matter of will and courage based upon faith in human and religious values."<sup>23</sup> Since Wilder's humanism is a religious humanism, he goes back to the Bible for religious values. In the process he recalls Judeo-Christian ideas of retribution and redemption. Wilder eventually dramatizes these ideas in the second Act. Eventually in the third Act, Wilder reinforces the biblical ethical values with the values of Spinoza, Plato, and Aristotle. These values can be identified, "as the search for ideal truth and beauty (Spinoza), moral order and responsibility (Plato), brief in the potential divinity of man (Aristotle)."<sup>24</sup> With these values he goes on to confirm faith in God, which is so well emphasized in Genesis.

However, in spite of the biblical context of the story, Wilder's focal point remains America as the Destiny of mankind. His effort is to show that the American life inculcates, "the moral and religious values that have assured man's survival since the beginning of civilization."<sup>25</sup> Much at the same time, it hides the weaknesses that have hindered human progress. In nutshell, The Skin of Our Teeth, according to Burbank, "is Wilder's most complete and direct dramatic expression of his theory of the relationship between the American and 'destiny.'"<sup>26</sup>

In his play The Matchmaker, Wilder gives a purely humanistic twist to his central theme of the celebration of American life. He dramatizes the role of humanism as the chief instrument to counteract the growing materialism of the age. As usual in the play, he reaffirms his central themes of human love, human values, human dignity, and the values of the ordinary. "From the little boy in Wilder's first play," writes R.W. Corrigan, "who says: 'I am not afraid of life. I will astonish it!' to Dolly Levi and her cohorts in adventure in The Matchmaker, Wilder has always been on the side of life and life is seen to be most directly affirmed through love."<sup>27</sup> The editors of Contemporary Literary Criticism also emphasize Wilder's, "celebratory attitude towards life and adventure."<sup>28</sup> Interestingly, Wilder asserts his humanistic ideals by making "fun of an American Puritan heritage – moneymaking and propriety."<sup>29</sup>

The Matchmaker is a slightly revised version of his earlier play, The Merchant of Yonkers: A Farce in Four Acts, written in 1938. Its central theme is the aspirations of the young Americans for a fuller and freer life. The plot of the play, centres around the sly game by Dolly Levi, the matchmaker who leads Horace Vandergelder, a merchant of Yonkers, to believe that she is arranging a union between him and a beautiful rich young orphan. The other important characters are Ermengarde, Ambrose, Cornelius, Barnaby, and Irene Molloy. Thematically, the play dramatizes the conflict between Vandergelder's economic values and the modern values of other characters. For Vandergelder, the highest values of human life are work and money, while for others the best human value is the enjoyment of life. Naturally other

characters, under the leadership of Dolly, go on to combat Vandergelder's economic philosophy which is based on acquisition of riches and exploitation of others. They adhere to Dolly's economic philosophy which is based on the elements of enjoyment and adventure. Explaining her philosophy to Ambrose, Dolly states:

Money should circulate like rain water. It should be flowing down among the people, through dressmakers and restaurants and cabmen, setting up a little business here, and furnishing a good time there.<sup>30</sup>

The play dramatizes this conflict of the economic philosophy in four acts. In Act I, Wilder tells us Horace Vandergelder's economic ideas in contrast to those of others. Vandergelder is a widower of miserly habits. He is a solid business man who preaches about the dangers of wastefulness and extravagance as well as the problems created by apprentices and employees such as his clerks Barnaby and Cornelius. Interestingly, he decided to turn the nonsense of love and marriage into a business deal. Contemplating the role of a wife as a contented drone, Vandergelder embarks upon a cautious search for a wife-employee. "Marriage," he reasons, "is a bribe to make a housekeeper think she's a householder" (The Matchmaker 270). He believes that wives and employees have to be made to feel part of the economy. He states: "Did you ever watch an ant carry a burden twice its size?" (The Matchmaker 270-271).

However, Wilder's ideas do not find favour with other characters like Barnaby, Cornelius, Ermengarde, and Dolly. While Barnaby and Cornelius want to have a fling in New York, Ermengarde wants to marry an insolvent



artist Ambrose Kemper. The witty and charming Dolly, who does not believe in the laissez'-faire philosophy, goes on to correct Vandergelder's mistaken economic beliefs. She states that money should not be "idle, frozen." "I don't like the thought of it lying in great piles, useless, motionless" (The Matchmaker 278). Dolly does not consider money as a mechanism for asserting power but as a resource for the betterment of the society:

It should be flowing down among the people, through dressmakers and restaurants and cabmen, setting up a little business here, and furnishing a good time there.

(The Matchmaker 278)

In the end of the Act, Dolly invites Vandergelder to come to New York and to dine with the women of his dreams. Interestingly, Dolly has a vision in her mind, the vision of making New York a happier place – "more like Vienna and less like a collection of nervous and tired ants" (The Matchmaker 279).

Act II dramatizes, "the themes of exploitation and generosity, manipulation and unencumbered pleasure."<sup>31</sup> It enacts Miss Molloy's disillusioned attitude towards life and his intention to marry Horace for material. The Act also embodies Molloy's liberation from the entanglement with a man whom she does not love. It highlights as well the changed economic philosophy of Vandergelder, under the influence of Dolly who successfully turns his platitudes to her own use. She does so with the delicious bits of dialogue, as the following:

VANDERGELDER:

Mrs. Molloy, I've got some advice to give you about your business.

Mrs. Molloy comes to the center of the room and puts Barnaby's hat on floor in window, then Cornelius' hat on the counter.

MRS. LEVI:

Oh, advice from Mr. Vandergelder! The whole city should hear this.

VANDERGELDER:

Standing in the workroom door, pompously:  
In the first place, the aim of business is to make profit.

MRS. MOLLOY:

Is that so?

MRS. LEVI:

I never heard it put so clearly before. Did you hear it?

VANDERGELDER:

Crossing the room to the left.  
You pay those girls of yours too much. You pay them as much as men. Girls like that enjoy their work. Wages, Mrs. Molloy, are paid to make people do work they don't want to do.

MRS. LEVI:

Mr. Vandergelder thinks so ably. And that's exactly the way his business is run up in Yonkers.

(The Matchmaker 318-319)

Act III begins at the Harmonic Gardens Restaurant. As all the characters collide at the Restaurant, complications begin to mount. Interestingly, Vandergelder has come to meet the fictitious Ernestina Simple, a model of thrift and beauty. At the same time, Cornelius and Barnaby are treating Miss Molloy and her young apprentice Minnie. Meanwhile, Ermengarde and her boyfriend dine upstairs. As the story progresses, Vandergelder dismisses Cornelius and Barnaby, when he discovers them dancing in the drag, during the evening. A scuffle takes place in which

Vandergelder loses his purse and Cornelius enjoys himself at the miser's expense. Without his purse, Vandergelder does not want to celebrate Christmas. Dolly goes on to predict his dismal future of an "unlived life": "you'll spend your last days listening at keyholes, for fear someone's cheating you" (The Matchmaker 368).

Act IV of the play, dramatizes the transformation of the characters and the resolution of their problems. Vandergelder comes out of his miserly groove and makes Cornelius his partner. Besides, Ermengarde and Ambrose are united. As money is used and greed vanishes, characters find themselves in a dizzy atmosphere of newly found pleasure and adventure. Interestingly, Dolly, who brought a transformation in Vandergelder, herself changes beyond recognition. From, once a desolate women sitting with her Bible and hearing the bell striking at Trinity Church, she comes to marry Vandergelder and rejoins human race in the drama of enjoyment and celebration of life. In this way, Wilder goes on to resolve, "private desolation and the suffering of people enclosed by culture and neurosis."<sup>32</sup>

In a way, The Matchmaker revives the thematic concerns of Heaven's My Destination in as much as it moots the idea of combating materialism with the vigorous, robust spirit of humanism. It also pleads for the moral improvement of the individual through self-effort rather than legislation. However, "the play," as Rex Burbank points out, "is really too good-natured to command serious consideration of its humanistic propositions; and perhaps this is one reason it failed in the thirties."<sup>33</sup>

However, in the plays, written during the later period of his literary career, Wilder abandons his humanistic mytho-religious vision. He goes on to introduce new elements to produce yet another multidimensional vision which has everything in it, religion, myth, mysticism, metaphysics etc. With the threads of Greek myth, Christianity, and existentialism, Wilder weaves a variegated pattern of a new mytho-religious vision which exemplifies the central principles of the ancient, medieval, and the modern worlds. This pattern in its best form, surfaces in The Alcestiad. Naturally as an embodiment of Wilder's updated vision and dramatic qualities the play, to use the words of Gerald Weales, "deserves a permanent place on the shelf of any Wilder enthusiast."<sup>34</sup> Wilder reworks the classical myth of Alcestis (dealt earlier by Euripides) in the light of Christianity and Existentialism. In Greek mythology, Alcestis figures as the Thessalian queen, the wife of Admetus. As her husband is threatened by death, she offers to die for him. In the play, Alcestis appears as a Christian saint who stands for safe-guarding the existential values of love, social commitment, sacrifice, and divinity in the human form.

Act I begins with a dialogue between Apollo and death. In the dialogue, Apollo tells Death that a change has taken place which is going to teach him (Death) something new. Meanwhile, the king Admetus wins the right to marry Alcestis by accomplishing the task of harnessing a wild boar, and a lion to a cart, and driving this vehicle around Jolkos, the native city of Alcestis. As Alcestis wishes to serve Apollo, she begs him for a sign on the night before her wedding. Meanwhile Tiresias the blind seer foretells the appearance of

herdsmen, one of whom will be Apollo, who has assumed human form in order to expiate a killing. When the four herdsmen arrive, Alcestis questions them. But they deny their identity. However, they go on to tell her that they are endowed with remarkable powers of cure, poetry, and vision. Though all of these qualities are conspicuous to Apollo, Alcestis is not able to recognize him. She becomes quite confused. The incident signifies that a strong desire for direct knowledge of divinity is not helpful, as it becomes a barrier in the recognition of the divinity. It rather produces confusion. To quote from the play:

If Tiresias is right, Apollo is here in Thessaly. But maybe the forgetful old man's instructions were to tell us that Apollo is here, but divided among many persons – among us four shepherds, and others too! For example, how do things stand with King Admetus?<sup>35</sup>

In spite of the blue-cloak, the sign of divinity, nobody is able to take the hint. Indeed man is unable to comprehend the meaningful signs in this world. Man can share the divine consciousness only after renouncing his wish for direct knowledge. Alcestis's inability to recognize Apollo makes her depressed. One of the herdsmen goes on to tell her that human beings cannot comprehend divinity, since human vision is fragmentary. They lack the power to visualize the whole, which is a precondition to experience. To take an excerpt from the text:

**ALCESTIS:**

But if we do not understand, then our life is hardly better than that of the animals.

SHEPHERD:

No, Mistress, to understand means to see something whole. But do we humans ever see a thing whole, and how it ends?... a part of something larger than we are able to see.<sup>36</sup>

However, Admetus seems to have an experience of the wholeness ordained by the gods. She is convinced that the role of the deity is meaningful. But when her mind is overpowered by absurdities, she loses her sense of inner security. It is only after some consideration that Alcestis becomes ready to marry Admetus and to live for him, his children, and his people. Apollo approves her decision, as he extends his hand towards Alcestis. His gesture is significant in as much as it reveals that the denizens of two worlds, the human and divine, act in unison.

Act II dramatizes the trial of the faith of Alcestis. As prophesied by Tiresias, one of the herdsmen inadvertently injures Admetus. The King lies hopelessly, languishing from the wound. Meanwhile, a messenger from Delphi reveals that the King will live if someone is willing to die for him. Many people, including the herdsman, who inflicted the wound, the night watchman, and the old servant Aglaia, are willing to die for the king. But Alcestis silences them and goes on to sacrifice her life. Subsequently, the King recovers and the Queen dies.

In Act III, Wilder enacts the events many years after the death of Alcestis. The barbarian King Agis of Thrace, kills Admetus and two of his children, and drives the oldest son Epimenides out of the country. Alcestis, the former Queen, becomes a slave at the court of the King. The country suffers

from a plague for which Alcestis is blamed. Scores of people, including the daughter of the king, Laodamia die. Meanwhile, Epimendes, the exiled son of Admetus appears with his friend Cheriander to take vengeance on Agis for his father's death. Alcestis makes herself known to Epimendes and dissuades him from carrying out his revenge because of Agis's extreme unhappiness. The play ends with Alcestis, staggering towards what she hopes and believes to be her grave and Apollo, promising her eternal life.

Thematically, The Alcestiad dramatizes the question of the divine and the human relationship. It goes on to expose the dangers, involved in the proximity between the divinity and the humanity. Tiresias is well aware of this sort of danger. He explains it to Admetus:

TIRESIAS:

...A great honor and a great danger has fallen to Thessaly's lot.

ADMETUS:

A danger, Tiresias?

TIRESIAS:

An honor and a danger... Don't you here in Thessaly know even the simplest and most self-evident things?<sup>37</sup>

However, Tiresias knows only the dangers, involved in nearness to gods but he does know their love for man. His ignorance can be marked in the brief scene in which Admetus makes a further enquiry:

ADMETUS:

You said something about a danger, Tiresias?

TIRESIAS:

(already half through the door way): Danger! Obviously, you simpleton. When they (abrupt gesture heavenwards) approach, it's always dangerous.

ADMETUS:

But my father said that Apollo always loved Thessaly...

TIRESIAS:

Yes – loved, loved, loved! Those up there should keep their love to themselves! Look at me: five hundred, six hundred years old, and so much loved by the gods that I am not permitted to die. If the gods would not love men, we would all be happy.<sup>38</sup>

Tiresias, a mouthpiece of gods, cannot realize the relationship of gods to men and of man to gods in normal terms of human feeling and reason. He advises that man should keep a fair distance from gods. Wilder takes up this question of the relationship and the distance once more in the speech of one of the shepherds who considers the question of bridging the gulf between gods and human beings:

Maybe there is another way – a way to cross over the gulf. I mean – maybe they know a way to go and bring up people they love – bring them up closer to themselves, I mean... It has slowly dawned on me that king Admetus has something that none of these others heroes have... What would life be good for, Princess, unless now and then a new kind of men came into the world – and a new kind of women?<sup>39</sup>

According to Rex Burbank, "The Alcestiad is an existentialist allegory portraying the mystic's pilgrimage."<sup>40</sup> In the play, Wilder gives a religious twist to the Greek myth, investing it with the Christian elements of renunciation and self-sacrifice. However, the element of self-sacrifice is viewed from different angles, in mystic, metaphysical, ethical, and existential. As for the religious angle, Wilder portrays Alcestis, as a Christian saint in a qualified sense. As Hermann Stresau states, "[t]hough she is a figure taken from prehistoric Greece, she is a saint of Christian characteristics. But she is



one who does not, however, renounce earthly life after the manner of medieval Christianity.”<sup>41</sup> She, like a modern human being, remains committed to her domestic and social responsibilities. The mystical angle is visible in the human and divine relationship, culminating into the union man and god. We can mark in the play, how Alcestis and Apollo are united in divine love. The mystical nature of the story is also confirmed by the absence of the element of conflict. Mysticism resolves a problem, not by conflict but by love. However, the lack of conflict seriously hampers the dramatic quality of the play. Furthermore, the mysticism of the play is not Christian but Existential. There is the Christian element of pilgrimage but it is given an Existential twist with the inclusion of the Existential elements of complete commitment to life, human love, and self-sacrifice as preconditions to divine grace. The existential element is also present in the portrait of Alcestis, as a “spiritual legislator for mankind.” Besides the Christian notions of pilgrimage is redefined in terms of Kierkegaardian process of becoming.

The mysticism of The Alcestiad, though manifestly Christian, can be understood only in the light of the existentialism of Nicholas Berdyaev, who equates religion with ethics, and divinity with humanity. Berdyaev holds that the moral acts of love, mercy, and sacrifice can end hatred, cruelty, and selfishness in the world. He also believes that “man participates in God’s creativity and that the moral act is one of co-creation which leads ultimately to mystical union of the human and the divine.”<sup>42</sup> The mystical vision of The Alcestiad embodies the metaphysical elements of chance and necessity as well.

By her self-sacrifice, Alcestis goes on to win over these elements which are obviously beyond human control. In this way, Wilder brings together the ancient element of paganism, the mediaeval element of Christianity, and the modern element of existentialism, and develops a vision, relevant to all ages.

To reiterate, Thornton Wilder goes on to embody his mytho-religious vision in his full length plays as well. He incorporates his early religious or Christian vision in such plays, as Our Town, The Skin of Our Teeth, and The Matchmaker, whereas he projects his later version in The Alcestiad. In Our Town, Wilder explores the values of human life in the trivialities of the daily American life. In the three acts of the play, Wilder dramatizes the story of Emily Webb and George Gibbs as a microcosm of the American life. Through their story, he evaluates the role of universal external forces as Time, Nature, and Death as well as such internal forces as Instinct, Love, Despair, and Apathy.

The theme of the celebration of the trivialities of American life, surfaces in The Skin of Our Teeth as well. The play shows how human race, in spite of hostile external or natural forces and internal catastrophic follies, can survive. But for survival it must continue to follow the ethical values of Judeo-Christianity, reinforced by the philosophical values of Spinoza (truth and beauty), Plato (moral order and responsibility), and Aristotle (potential divinity of man). The play is influenced by Joyce's Finnegans Wake and the crisis atmosphere of World War II. The play dramatizes the lives of George, and

Maggie Antrobus, their children Gladys and Henry, and their maid Sabina and through them tells us the history of five thousand years of human civilization.

The celebration of American life has another twist in The Matchmaker, which highlights role of humanism, as a counterweight against twentieth century materialism. Making fun of the American Puritan heritage, Wilder dramatizes the aspirations of the young Americans for a fuller and freer life. Through the characters like Dolly Levi, the matchmaker, Horace Vandergelder a merchant of Yonkers, his employees Cornelius and Barnaby, his niece Ermengarde and her boy-friend Ambrose and Irene Molloy, Wilder presents the conflicting economic values of Americans. He goes on to plead not only for human values but also for moral improvement of the individual through self-effort rather than legislation.

Wilder's later mytho-religious vision is exemplified by The Alcestiad. The play builds a multidimensional vision, incorporating the elements of Greek myth, Christianity as well as the existential ideas of Soren Kierkegaard and the mystical ideas of Nicholas Berdyaev. In the play, Wilder reworks the pagan myth of Alcestis, earlier dealt by Euripides and makes it relevant to modern human condition. He portrays Alcestis, as a Christian saint who stands for safe-guarding the existential values of love, social commitment, sacrifice, and the belief in divinity in human form. In three acts, Wilder portrays the life of Alcestis including her marriage with Admetus, her devotion to god Apollo, her sacrifice to save her husband's life and advice to her son not to take revenge. On the whole, Wilder's The Alcestiad is an existentialist allegory, which

portrays Alcestis' mystic pilgrimage described not only in terms of religion and metaphysics but also of modern existentialism.

### Chapter 3 – Notes

<sup>1</sup>Thornton Wilder qtd. David Castronovo, Thornton Wilder (New York: The Ungar Publishing Company, 1986) 92: hereafter cited as Castronovo.

<sup>2</sup>Rex Burbank, Thornton Wilder (Boston: Twayne Publisher, 1961) 75: hereafter cited as Burbank.

<sup>3</sup>Burbank 77.

<sup>4</sup>Thornton Wilder, Three Plays: Our Town, The Skin of Our Teeth, The Matchmaker (New York: Harper and Row, 1957) 45: hereafter the play cited as Our Town with paginations.

<sup>5</sup>Castronovo 87.

<sup>6</sup>Burbank 77.

<sup>7</sup>Gertude Stein qtd. Burbank 78

<sup>8</sup>Burbank 78.

<sup>9</sup>Burbank 78-79.

<sup>10</sup>Burbank 79.

<sup>11</sup>Burbank 82-83.

<sup>12</sup>Burbank 83.

<sup>13</sup>R.H. Gardner, "Thornton (Niven) Wilder," Contemporary Literary Criticism, Volume 35, ed. Daniel G. Marowski (Detroit, Michigan: Gale Research Company Book Tower, 1985) 445: hereafter the article cited as Gardner and the book as Contemporary Literary Criticism.

<sup>14</sup>Bernard Grebanier, Thornton Wilder (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1964) 35: hereafter cited as Grebanier.

<sup>15</sup>Richard H. Goldstone, "Wilder Thornton," Contemporary Literary Criticism, Volume 6, eds. Carolyn Riley and Phyllis Carmel Mendelson (n.p.) 1976, 575: hereafter the article cited as Goldstone and the book as Contemporary Literary Criticism.

<sup>16</sup>Burbank 89.

<sup>17</sup>Thornton Wilder, The Skin of Our Teeth (New York: Harper and Row, 1957) 111: hereafter the play cited as The Skin of Our Teeth with paginations

<sup>18</sup>Castronovo 101.

<sup>19</sup>Grebanier 37.

<sup>20</sup>Castronovo 102.

<sup>21</sup>Grebanier 37.

<sup>22</sup>Burbank 90.

<sup>23</sup>Burbank 92.

<sup>24</sup>Burbank 95.

<sup>25</sup>Burbank 93.

<sup>26</sup>Burbank 95.

<sup>27</sup>R.W. Corrigan, "Wilder Thornton," Contemporary Literary Criticism, Vol. 5, ed. Carolyn Riley (Detroit, Michigan: Gale Research Company Book Tower, n.d.) 494: hereafter the article cited as Corrigan and the book as Contemporary Literary Criticism.

<sup>28</sup>Daniel G. Marowski, "Thornton (Niven) Wilder," Contemporary Literary Criticism, Volume 35 (n.d.) (1985) 436: hereafter the article cited as Marowski and the book as Contemporary Literary Criticism.

<sup>29</sup>Ruby Cohn, "Wilder Thornton," Contemporary Literary Criticism, Volume 15 (n.d.) (1980) 570: hereafter the article cited as Cohn and the book as Contemporary Literary Criticism with Vol.

<sup>30</sup>Thornton Wilder, The Matchmaker (New York: Harper and Row, 1957) 278: hereafter cited as The Matchmaker with paginations.

<sup>31</sup>Castronovo 95-96

<sup>32</sup>Castronovo 98

<sup>33</sup>Burbank 86.

<sup>34</sup>Gerald Weales, "Wilder Thornton," Contemporary Literary Criticism, Volume 10 ed. Dedria Bryfonski (n.d.) (1979) 536: hereafter the article cited as Weales and the book as Literary Criticism.

<sup>35</sup>Thornton Wilder, The Alcestiad, qtd. Helmut Papajewski, Thornton Wilder (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1968) 165: hereafter cited as Papajewski. All the excerpts of The Alcestiad are from this book.

<sup>36</sup>Papajewski 166.

<sup>37</sup>Papajewski 169.

<sup>38</sup>Papajewski 170.

<sup>39</sup>Papajewski 171.

<sup>40</sup>Burbank 108.

<sup>41</sup>Hermann Stresau, Thornton Wilder (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1971) 90-91: hereafter cited as Stresau.

<sup>42</sup>Burbank 111.

## CHAPTER 4

### MYTHO-RELIGIOUS VISION IN THE NOVELS OF THORNTON WILDER

Thornton Wilder continues to portray his early mytho-religious vision in his early novels as well. One should not be surprised to find the elements of religious humanism in such early fictional works as The Cabala (1926), The Bridge of San Luis Rey (1928), The Woman of Andros (1930), and Heaven's My Destination (1938). However, as compared to early plays, there is one major difference. In the novels, Wilder is no longer content with old forms and techniques. He now goes for mythical structure and distinct new techniques to reveal the spirit of the religious humanism and the American life. He still cherishes the moral themes of love and faith; the conflict of past and present; and of traditional moral values; and the naturalistic tendencies such as rationalism, scepticism, and hedonism. But in the novels, his tone becomes a little more realistic. Now he does not forget to point out the discrepancy between faith and the fact or the chasm existing between classical humanism and American life.

The earliest expression of this modified mytho-religious vision surfaces in The Cabala, which is not a novel in the strict sense of the term, but only a collection of stories, which mark the influence of James Branch Cabell, Henry James, and Proust. The book is remarkable not so much for its thematic value,



as for the style of modernizing the characters of Greek gods. "Like Cabell's esoteric romances, particularly Jurgen, The Cabala brings past and present together in modern and mythological characters but with this difference: Wilder brings his Classical gods to the present and suggests their presence in characters drawn with considerable realism."<sup>1</sup>

From the thematic point of view, Wilder's central concern in The Cabala is the revival of the Greek values of humanism or the enlightened faith for energizing the American consciousness. He achieves his aim by yoking together the humanistic spirit of the past and the modern spirit of rationalism and materialism. By doing so, he tries to reconcile the tension between intellect and sensibility, which was highlighted by T.S. Eliot. As for the sources, the novel remains an embodiment of the fusion of Henry James, Proust, and Cabell on the one hand and his own experiences and observations of Rome on the other. In his strategy to revive Greek elements, Thornton introduces classical gods in the garb of modern personages and the elements of mystic journey and spiritual imagery to underscore the best elements of the past tradition.

Interestingly, Wilder provides the novel with a typical title "reminiscent of Jewish mysticism or of the English secret society during the reign of Charles II in the seventeenth century."<sup>2</sup> Supporting Donald Haberman, Helmut Papajewski also observes that the title "can relate either to the theosophic interpretation of the religious scriptures of the Jews, or to a conspiratorial

society of a kind not very different from that which had extensive power for a time in seventeenth-century England."<sup>3</sup>

The story of the novel, divided into five parts, centres round two young Americans in Rome and the Cabala members, a group of aristocratic Europeans and Americans living a luxurious life. The central character is Samuele (one of the two Americans) who is eventually the teller of the story. He travels with another American, the pedantic young puritan James Blair, a Harvard-trained student of antiquities. Blair has come to Rome as an archaeological adviser to a film studio. Interestingly, it is Blair who introduces the Cabala people to Samuele. Describing them as powerful and exclusive people, he tells him:

They're very rich and influential. Everyone's afraid  
of them. Everybody suspects them of plots to over-turn things.  
Political?

No, not exactly. Sometimes

Social swells?

Yes, of course. But more than that, too. Fierce intellectual  
snobs, they are...<sup>4</sup>

In the book, Wilder goes on to describe Samuele's so many encounters with other characters. In "First Encounter," the novelist takes his protagonist across the Campagna in a train with Blair. In this section, Samuele comes in contact with Miss. Grier, the American leader of an international sect and a descendant of Dutch railroad magnate. She is a conduit of Cabala information. Though rich, she lives an empty life, trying to beat "the moneyed emptiness of her days" with schemes to help her friends. At the same time, Samuele meets Marie-Astree Luce de Monfontaine, a preposterous woman who is a staunch votary of the divine right of the kings. Samuele comes to learn about other

members of the society, including the witty Cardinal Vaini and the beautiful Alix, Princess d' Espoli. In this section, Samuele and Blair pay a call on a dying poet who reminds us of Keats. The poet is a suffering soul, dying of consumption in a small apartment near Spanish steps.

In the next section, "Book Two: Marcantonio," Wilder introduces other important characters, like La Duchessa D' Aquilanera, a Colonna married to a Tuscan and her son the sixteen year old Marcantonio. The Dutches is, "a short, black-faced woman with two aristocratic wens on the left slope of her nose, yellow, dirty hands, covered with paste emeralds" (The Cabala 32). Her son is a sports-car-driving libertine, living a reckless life. She seeks Samuele's help to reform the erring lad. Meanwhile, Samuele comes across the suave and brilliant Cardinal Vaini, a world-weary Prelate who knows the boy and slyly asks Samuele to keep him 'quiet' for a while. Obviously, both the mother and the Prelate do not want to reform the young boy but only to keep him quiet till his marriage. Their attitude comes as a shock to the young American. Nevertheless, in his puritan zeal, Samuele determines to undertake this rather difficult task. He eventually becomes enlisted, as a combination of sports-coach and brotherly adviser to Marcantonio. He tries to force him into a state of repentance. At first, Samuele succeeds in his plan but his success is short lived, as the "enforced abstinence drives Marcantonio into accepting the mocking challenge of his sister as a partner in incest, after which horrifying act there is nothing for him to do but commit suicide."<sup>5</sup>

In the third section, "Book Three: Alix," Thornton deals with the hopeless and humiliating love of the Princess d' Espoli for Blair. The Princess, though the lovely, witty, and adorable centre of The Cabala, is herself loveless. She makes pathetic attempts to attract Blair but fails. Blair, though learned and athletic, remains cool and impersonal. He cannot even see what is around him or feel the agony of others. Indeed, he is a pursuer of the beauty in classical art and literature, but blind to the value of the modern Rome and the beauty of a woman. Naturally Blair is incapable of responding to the beauty of Alix. "He is able," writes Bernard Grabiner, "neither to value nor to comprehend this creature the very breath of whose life is love. His rejection of her has the quality of a mortal blow upon her sensitive, exquisite nature."<sup>6</sup>

In "Book Four: Astree-Luce and the Cardinal," Wilder portrays the encounter between Cardinal Vaini and Astree' Luce, a large-limbed and bony woman, a devoted French royalist who lives only to see the divine right of kings promulgated as a dogma of the Church. However, her wish remains unfulfilled, since the Cardinal is too sophisticated to recover real faith. He rather goes on to destroy Luce's faith and drive her to scepticism. Subsequently, Luce begins to look upon the Cardinal as a devil. In a desperate attempt, she grasps a gun and shoots at him but she misses the aim. The character of Luce is significant in as much as it represents a faith that is without reflection and without power to challenge scepticism. Her faith in the divine right of kings is absurd. "Her dense innocent mind is also guided by a simplistic conception of Christian faith and the efficacy of prayer."<sup>7</sup>

The final chapter, "The Dusk of the Gods," narrates Miss Grier's revelation of the final "secret" of the Cabala. Grier believes that the old gods are still in the city in human forms. However, Samuele now leaves this cult of self-absorption and sails from the Bay of Naples to America. On board, he invokes Virgil and asks for his guidance. Subsequently he has an imaginary conversation with him, the greatest of the Roman poets who was profusely admired by Christians in the Middle Ages. The poet denounces the kind of vanity and pathetic illusion of the Cabala members telling the young American that Rome and its patrician obsessions are not eternal.

Nothing is eternal save Heaven. Seek out some city that is young.  
The secret is to make a city, not to rest in it.

(The Cabala 147)

Virgil goes on to exhort Samuele to be creative. However, at the same time the poet belittles the value of human endeavour which, in his opinion, is nothing more than an illusion. In reality, as Virgil tells Samuele, human life is beset with illusions. Nobody can overcome this web of illusion, nor even Samuele who, as a citizen of the new world, is endowed with tremendous intellectual power. Everybody, in his opinion, is imprisoned by the pathetic limitations of human nature. Delivering this pronouncement, Virgil says:

All your thoughts are guesses, all your body is shaken with  
breath, all your senses are infirm, and your mind ever full of the  
fumes of one passion or another. Oh, what a misery to be a man.

(The Cabala 147)

Obviously, the novel, as Bernard Grebanier believes, "is imbued with the Greek spirit." "The air of the classical world," he adds, "breathes upon this

delightful book from its first page. It is Virgil's country: from the fields a wind descends 'in a long Virgilian sigh, for the land that has inspired sentiment in the poet ultimately receives its sentiment from him.'<sup>8</sup> Wilder creates this classical world in order to preserve the Hellenic-Christian culture, especially its humanistic principles of restraint and decorum. He wants to introduce the values and the principles of this culture to reinforce the newly emerging cultural tradition of his own country. Furthermore, he energizes the classical world, projected in Cabala with spiritual, mythic, and religious contents, which are so central to his mytho-religious vision. Interestingly, Thornton articulates Samuele's trip to Rome in terms of the spiritual journey. No wonder, M.C. Kurer finds, "the American on his physical and spiritual journey."<sup>9</sup> Likewise, David Castronovo believes that the imagery, used in the novel, exemplifies, "the author's spiritual awareness and feelings of distaste for his crumbling civilization."<sup>10</sup> Besides the spiritual content, there is a certain mystic quality, which provides Cabala with a strange aroma. Obviously the novel was received, as a book by a mystic. The Times called Wilder, "a mystic" and "a fine stylist," who "clothes mysticism in his style and lightens it with jewels of charming observations and felicitous expression..."<sup>11</sup>

However, spiritual and mystic elements are only peripheral. The central stage is occupied by the religious content, especially the Christian content. Thornton is not interested in the old world religion as such. He is interested only in the elements which supported the Christian faith. For instance, he invokes Virgil who has been called "the harbinger of Christianity," "the last

pagan and the first Christian."<sup>12</sup> While summoning the poet, Thornton goes on to eulogize him in some memorable words:

Oh, greatest spirit of the ancient world and prophet of the new...  
thou first Christian in Europe.

(The Cabala 145)

Interestingly, Thornton introduces invokes mythical characters, in the guise of modern people. He draws "the Cabalists as modern incarnations of Jupiter (Cardinal Vaini), Demeter (Miss Grier), Pan (Marcantonio), Venus and Adonis (Alix and Blair), and Mercury (the narrator)."<sup>13</sup> However, the mythic transformation of these characters, is only to emphasize continuity and the relevance of the past experience to combat the problems, faced by the modern humanity. Nevertheless most of these characters, belonging to the Cabala tradition, are antagonistic to the modern spirit of rationalism and materialism. They belong to a decadent generation, bereft of moral and religious codes. Most of them live a luxurious life without moral compunction. Obviously, they are embodiments of three-fold decline. First of all, they exemplify moral decline or even depravity. The best examples of this moral nihilism are Marcantonio, his mother, and the Cardinal. While, Marcantonio is a debauch of the worst kind, his mother and the Cardinal have no consideration whether the actions of the boy are right or wrong. As Rex Burbank points out, the mother "is concerned solely with preventing his reputation from becoming so bad that the marriage will not materialize and the noble line from which he is descended be discontinued. Nor does the Cardinal, who also urges Samuele to help reform the boy for 'a month or two,' believe any longer in moral

behavior."<sup>14</sup> This attitude of the mother and the Cardinal, bewilders Samuele. He comes to believe that the Cardinal does not believe in temperance. When the American accuses him of moral intemperance, the Cardinal retorts:

Believe in it. Of course I do. Am I not a priest?  
Then why not make the boy...?  
But after all, we are in the world.  
I laughed. I shouted with a laughter that would have been insulting, if it hadn't contained a touch of hysteria. Oh, I thank thee, dear Father Vaini, I said to myself. I thank thee for that word. How clear it makes all Italy, all Europe. Never try to do anything against the bent of human nature. I came from a colony guided by exactly the opposite principle.

(The Cabala 53-54)

The moral decline in the novel is paralleled by the religious decline. The best exemplification of this decline, can be found in the relationship between Astree-Luce and the Cardinal. Obviously, both of them have different notions of religion and religious beliefs. "Religion," as Malcolm Goldstein states, "has filled out the lives of both of them, but in quite different ways. To Astree-Luce it is the authority of the Church, which the pressures of the modern world now threaten. For the Cardinal, it is not an authoritarian force, but the direct, simple consolation of the people, and as such does not require the elaborate machinery of the Vatican."<sup>15</sup>

The religious beliefs of the Cardinal and Astree-Luce are symptomatic of the petrification of religious orthodoxy, represented by the religious institutions like the Vatican. While the religious tradition, represented by the Vatican, lacks intellectual energy, the faith represented by the Cardinal lacks morality. "Detached from the intellectual and social currents of the day,"



writes Burbank, "the Church (standing for institutional religion in general) has lost its moral meaning for both Marcantonio and the Cardinal."<sup>16</sup>

As Thornton narrates in The Cabala, both the gods and the Church have become irrelevant to the modern world. What is relevant is only the humanistic theme of enlightened faith that can be defined as a religious faith which must begin on the human level. However, Wilder does not believe in the agonizing love of his superior person, or a love that one finds between D'Espoli and Blair. He champions only the love, based on an enlightened faith in which intellect and sensibility dissolve. Evidently The Cabala remains an embodiment of Thornton's early mytho-religious vision which fuses humanism with a religion, endowed with puritan sensibility.

The themes, embodied in The Cabala surface in The Bridge of San Luis Rey (1928) as well but with a difference, in as much as they are "serious," "transcendental," "religious," and "philosophical."<sup>17</sup> The novel exemplifies the same yoking together of the past and the present and narrates the same human predicaments of religion, morality, and mysteries of human life. It goes on to build the case for enlightened faith which begins on human level and points out the same discrepancy between faith and fact. However, all these themes are treated in a new light and new context. Wilder now introduces a new spirituality which brings certain epiphanies and offers the bridge of love to overcome human misery. At the same time, he evokes the modern themes of isolation. Furthermore, he goes on to consider incidents of life in a philosophical framework which can be interpreted in pagan as well as Christian

terms. Obviously, while treating old themes, Thornton employs a somewhat modern terminology.

In order to clothe his themes, Wilder uses Prosper Merimee's drama La Carosse du Saint – Sacrement (1829), a play about the famous actress Camila Perichole enacted in Lima, Peru. It is this play which gave Wilder the idea of this novel. The first chapter, entitled "Perhaps An Accident" begins the story in a simple and factual way. "On Friday noon, July the twentieth, 1714, the finest bridge in all Peru broke and precipitated five travellers into the gulf below."<sup>18</sup> The travellers who lose their life, are the Marquesa de Montemayor and her servant Pepita, Esteban, Uncle Pio, and a young boy, Don Jaime. One person, Brother Juniper, takes upon himself the task of investigating their deaths and determine if, "we live by accident and die by accident, or we live by plan and die by plan" (The Bridge 19). Brother Juniper tries to prove that it was providential. Interpreting the disaster, both from the pagan and the Christian angle, he goes on to assert that, "human beings are like flies to wanton boys, and they are the sparrows whose falls are known to God."<sup>19</sup>

Some say that we shall never know and that to the gods we are like the flies that the boys kill on a summer day, and some say, on the contrary, that the very sparrows do not lose a feather that has not been brushed away by the finger of God.

(The Bridge 23)

The second section entitled, "The Marquesa De Montemayor" describes the story of Dona Maria, an old and drunken woman, who many years before married a ruined noble man and had a child (Dona Clara) by him. The mother

and daughter are locked in a strange relationship of infatuation and estrangement. While the mother directs all her attention on the young woman, the daughter is coldly indifferent to her and is always anxious to get away from the tyranny of her love. Eventually, in order to avoid her, she marries a Spanish grandee and returns with him to his home in Spain, leaving her mother in Peru. But Marquesa continues to love her, begging her love through eloquent letters. Her suffering from the unrequited love for her daughter, gives her insight into the isolation of the other humans:

She saw that the people of this world moved about in an armour of egotism, drunk with self-gazing, athirst for compliments, hearing little of what was said to them, unmoved by the accidents that befell their closest friends, in dread of all appeals that might interrupt their long communion with their own desires.

(The Bridge 36-39)

However, the unfortunate old woman meets a tragic end, as she falls with Pepita from the bridge.

The next section entitled, "Esteban" describes the fates of the twin brothers, Esteban and Manuel who are reared, as foundlings in the convent of Madre Maria del Pilar. They are so inseparably one that they cannot be distinguished. The two brothers live together and work together. They have developed a private language, which no one can understand. However, their love for each other is disturbed by Manuel's attraction for the actress Perichole. As Manuel's attraction for the woman grows, he changes his attitude towards his beloved brother. With Manuel's changed behaviour Esteban comes to discover, "that secret from which one never quite recovers,

that even in the most perfect love one person loves less profoundly than the other" (The Bridge 100). After some time Manuel accidentally cuts his knee and dies from the wound. Left alone, Esteban wanders restlessly about the country. He contemplates to commit suicide but is saved at the last moment by Captain Alvarado, a friend of Maria del Pilar. But shortly after this incident, while crossing the bridge, he meets his death. Thus the lonely man is eventually released from his loneliness by the collapse of the bridge.

The fourth chapter is entitled "Uncle Pio." It tells us the story of Uncle Pio and Don Jaime, the son of Camila Perichole. Uncle Pio was very intimate to Perichole. He had been her friend and confidant, and somewhat the suspect guardian and tutor. He was a man of many parts, "a player of roles, a protean man who has lived by his wits as spy, pimp, agent provocateur, errand boy, animal trainer, acting coach, drama connoisseur."<sup>20</sup> In his latest role, he reads to Camila who is illiterate and, "shapes her into a Lima celebrity."<sup>21</sup> But Uncle Pio, who comes to love Camila, loses his beloved, because his teaching has been too successful. The actress outgrows Uncle Pio and becomes the mistress of the Viceroy. However, the Pio continues to love her. He makes attempt to see her but is violently rebuffed. Nevertheless, he asks her to, "let him educate her little son Jaime, a sickly child fathered by the Viceroy. After getting Camila's consent, Pio and the boy go off together and perish on the bridge."<sup>22</sup>

The final chapter entitled "Perhaps An Intention," concludes the novel, highlighting the fact that the collapse of the bridge was the result of some undeferrable purpose of God. After the funeral of the victims, the scene shifts

to the Convent. All the characters who were left behind, come to visit the Abbess. The Marquesa's daughter meets the Abbess of the Convent and shows her mother's last letter. Perichole also comes to tell the Abbess about Esteban, Pepita, Uncle Pio, and Jaime. All the characters who come there believe that, "[b]efore their death the five characters had, in Catholic terms, entered a state of grace, and by their deaths they have transformed those whom they loved."<sup>23</sup> The Abbess herself muses over the mystery of life and death. She tells them that after death every human being is forgotten. She knows:

...soon we shall die and all memory of those five will have left the earth, and we ourselves shall be loved for a while and forgotten. But the love will have been enough; all those impulses of love return to the love that made them. Even memory is not necessary for love. There is a land of the living and a land of the dead and the bridge is love, the only survival, the only meaning.

(The Bridge 234-235)

Thematically, The Bridge, as Hermann Stresau points out is, an, "unusual amalgamation of European classical elements with an American naturalness of form."<sup>24</sup> With this fusion, Wilder goes on to project problems, central to modern human condition such as, "man's defenselessness, the suffocating meaninglessness of existence, the cold loneliness of the individual, and at the same time his deep longing for security, love, and meaningfulness."<sup>25</sup>

Interestingly, Wilder considers these problems in a predominantly religious and philosophical background. He takes up a tragic accident the collapse of the bridge, to pose the questions of human existence. He asks:

"[D]id the accident – if accident it was – occur to those particular five? Was it blind chance, was it the hand of God, or were these five in some way the authors of their own deaths?"<sup>26</sup> Through these questions, Wilder interprets the question of spirituality, the experience of epiphany, and the problem of human isolation. He considers these questions with Brother Juniper, who is not only a devout person but also a man of philosophical nature. Interestingly, he explains these questions in terms which are as much Christian as pagan. However, Wilder does not answer these questions in unequivocal terms. His answers are so confused that they baffle most of his critics. Puzzled by his attitude, Robert Morris asks: "Was Wilder's position essentially Roman Catholic? Calvinist? Agnostic? Atheist?"<sup>27</sup>

Indeed Wilder's religious position is ambiguous. As we have pointed out in our discussion of his mytho-religious vision, he remains wavering between Puritanism and Catholicism. While in spirit Thornton is an American puritan, in his mystical beliefs he is inclined towards Catholic mysticism. In The Bridge of San Luis Rey, we find a strong evidence of his Catholic leanings. It is exemplified by Wilder's treatment of love. "Every type of love," writes Kuner, "is scrutinized in this novel: primitive sexual love, exaggerated fraternal love, one-sided mother love. All are, in one way or another, impure. But all pass through a kind of filter that drains off the dross, and what is left is the Christian agape-people loving each other in the same way God loves them."<sup>28</sup>

Even though, Wilder projects many philosophical and religious questions, concerning human existence, his focal point is love. Victor White believes that the most astonishing thing in Wilder is, "compassion and his grasp of the perverseness not only of things and Fate but of the human heart."<sup>29</sup> As pointed out earlier, Wilder projects different forms of love. For delineating the varieties of love, he introduces typical characters. He creates the characters of, "an old woman whose daughter spurns her affection, an adolescent girl who lives only for the affection of an older woman, a young man whose sole object of love is dead, an old man whose sole object of love has rejected him, and a child whose mother is too self-involved to give him the affection he requires."<sup>30</sup>

Wilder also goes on to provide us the reasons behind the isolation of these characters from their society. "For one reason or another," Goldstein states, "each stands apart from human society: two because they are old and unkempt; two because they are orphans; and the fifth because he is chronically ill. And with the exception of Don Jaime, each has added to the barrier between himself and society by failing to respond to any activity which does not involve his beloved."<sup>31</sup> Most of Wilder's characters suffer from the unresponsive attitude of their lovers. During the life-time of their lovers, these characters remain callous. It is only after their death that they come to realize the intensity of love. "The full impact of love," states Rex Burbank, "as a first condition to meaningful living comes to all the survivors after the disaster."<sup>32</sup> However, there is one character, the Abbess, who stands apart from the rest.

She is the only character who has fulfilled her life in love. But even she is found lacking in some way or the other in her attitude towards Pepita. As she confesses, she has been too busy to appreciate fully the devotion of Pepita. In spite of her indifference to Pepita, she is convinced of the value of love in a meaningless and purposeless world. She goes on to reflect:

“Even now,” she thought, “almost no one remembers Esteban and Pepita, but myself. Camila alone remembers her Uncle Pio and her son; this woman [Dona Clara], her mother.”

(The Bridge 234)

The Abbess eventually points out that death is inevitable, and it is only love which can bridge the gulf between the land of the dead and the land of the living human beings. Thornton argues that life is meaningless without love. Therefore he believes that it is the moral responsibility of man to respond to love of his fellow beings. Man has to behave as a moral being. Commenting on love, as a moral responsibility in Thornton, Rex Burbank writes: “Moral behavior, Wilder maintains, is, therefore, a purely human responsibility and has clear-cut human consequences. Whatever the interpretation of the disaster, it generated in the survivors a love that had not previously existed.”<sup>33</sup>

Thornton's next novel The Woman of Andros (1930), also embodies the elements of his early mytho-religious vision. Subsequently, it is dominated by his favourite theme of European classicism and Christianity. In this novel, Wilder re-enacts scenes from the Hellenic world. But this Hellenic world is the world of pre-Christian Greece. At the heart of this world lie the religious elements which eventually anticipate Christianity. In order to fulfil this



purpose, he draws his material from Andrai, "a comedy of the Latin playwright Terence, who in turn based his work upon two comedies of the Greek dramatist and poet Menander."<sup>34</sup>

However, Wilder transforms Terence's story, giving it a tragic twist and saturating it with Christianity and Platonic humanism. This brief novel, writes Bernard Grebanier, is "[b]athed in transparent light, like the light peculiar to Greece itself," and "is caressed by the air of Platonism."<sup>35</sup> Wilder uses Terence's story in the first part of the novel. But he goes on to recast it to suit his religious and humanistic vision. In Terence, the story takes place in Athens, where Pamphilus, son of Simo, falls in with the sister of the Hetaera Chrysis – the Woman of Andros. Since Pamphilus is supposed to marry the daughter of his neighbour Chremes, complications arise. However, these complications are happily resolved with the discovery that Pamphilus' beloved is nobody else than the daughter of Chremes. But Wilder changes the story in as much as he removes the scene from Athens to the island of Brynos. Furthermore, though he adopts the central characters of Terence, he leaves many others like Davus, Charinus, and Dromo. Besides, Wilder makes a number of modifications to Christianize the pagan story. For instance, he portrays the protagonist of the story, Chrysis, a beautiful courtesan of thirty five, as "deeply versed in the classics and, like all good Platonists, a kind of pre-Christian."<sup>36</sup> Likewise he portrays Pamphilus, as a religious young man, whose temperament anticipates a typical Christian temperament.

In the story, Pamphilus, as the son of a wealthy merchant, spends time at the house of Chrysis. She invites many young bachelors once a week and serves them exotic foods. She also tells them stories and teaches the lads, how to speak and behave in society. At the same time, she keeps a household of the old and invalid people. Once she recounts a story of a dead hero, who was permitted to revisit the earth for one day, on condition that he would have to live both, as a participant and as a foreknowing observer:

Suddenly the hero saw that the living too are dead and that we can only be said to be alive in those moments when our hearts are conscious of our treasure; for our hearts are not strong enough to love every moment.<sup>37</sup>

As the dead hero saw, the living too are dead, since they do not value their everyday life, his heart was filled with pain. Subsequently, only after an hour, he begged Zeus to release him from the terrible dream of his renewed earthly existence. With the story of the dead hero, Pamphilus, who was among the guests of the Symposium, comes to understand the secret of human life. He realizes that he would also become a prisoner of such meaningless life. Discharging the duties of a husband, father, and the head of the family, he would eventually grow old:

Time would have flowed by him like a sigh, with no plan made, no rules set, no strategy devised that would have taught him how to save these others and himself from the creeping gray, from the too-easily accepted frustration.

“How does one live?” he asked the bright sky. “What does one do first?”

(The Woman of Andros 150)

On her part, Chrysis is also overwhelmed by this question of earthly existence, its beginning and its end. Even though, she finds momentary release in the bright talks, she cannot avoid the feeling of loneliness. Chrysis goes on to consider herself, as one already dead. She is persistently tormented by the questions about life and its meaning:

It was Chrysis's reiterated theory of life that all human beings – save a few mysterious exceptions who seemed to be in possession of some secret from the gods – merely endured the slow misery of existence, hiding as best they could their consternation that life had no wonderful surprises after all and that its most difficult burden was the incommunicability of love.

(The Woman of Andros 150)

Apart from Chrysis and Pamphilus, there is another character, the young priest of Apollo, who has taken the vow of celibacy. He lives merely on fruits and vegetables. But still he is a great athlete and possesses tremendous physical and mental power. By his personality he anticipates the Saviour. Chrysis secretly loves Pamphilus, who in his turn, loves Chrysis' sister Glycerium. In this way, Chrysis and Pamphilus come to experience the agony that love brings in its wake:

It was true, true beyond a doubt, tragically true, that the world of love and virtue and wisdom was the true world and her failure in it all the more overwhelming. But she was not alone; he too saw the long and failing war as she did, and she loved him...

(The Woman of Andros 160)

After some months, Chrysis comes to bear a great pain in her side. Lying on the bed, she awaits death with equanimity. However, she is still concerned with Pamphilus. Realizing that his chances for marrying Glycerium

are remote, Pamphilus goes to the dying Chrysis. He swears to her that no harm will come to her sister, even if she is not married to him. However, Chrysis is concerned not so much with earthly things, as with mental life. As on her death bed, she confesses to Pamphilus,

“... let me say now...” her hands opened and closed upon the cloths that covered her, “... I want to say to someone... that I have known the worst that the world can do to me, and that nevertheless I praise the world and all living. All that is, is well.”

(The Woman of Andros 180)

Chrysis goes on to urge Pamphilus to accept like her, whatever the gods offer. She dies. At the funeral Glycerium tries to throw herself on the pyre. But she is saved by her Pamphilus. Simo explains the difficulties, preventing the marriage of Pamphilus and Glycerium. He tells, since the girl is not a Greek citizen, she would never fit in their society. However, after realizing his son's intense love for her, he relents. Subsequently, he purchases Glycerium from her buyer. Ultimately Glycerium dies in childbirth. It is in the death of his beloved that Pamphilus comes to understand the meaning of life:

what news there was from the last resources of courage and hope, to live on, to live by. But in confusion and with flagging courage he repeated: “I praise all living, the bright and the dark.”

(The Woman of Andros 203)

The novel ends with a star shining tranquilly over the land “soon to be called Holy,” and “preparing its precious burden” (The Woman of Andros 203). Throughout the novel, as Bernard Grebanier states, “Pamphilus has been seeking for the meaning that Christ is soon to enunciate.”<sup>38</sup> It is evident from

the story that Wilder's chief aim is to locate the presence of Christian elements in the ancient Greek world. In order to underscore this presence, he introduces four major adult characters Chrysis, Pamphilus, the priest and Simo, as the embodiments of Christian spirit in some way or the other. However, the Christian elements are best exemplified in Chrysis. Interestingly she combines in herself the best values not only of Christianity but also of pagan humanism. As Malcolm Goldstein contends she, "has somehow discovered the way to live, which is to feel moment by moment, with perfect awareness, all that life brings one's way."<sup>39</sup> Besides, she has the humanitarian disposition which entails love for the troubled spirits, the battered and distressed persons. Likewise Pamphilus is also a genial soul, full of the milk of human kindness and devotedly attentive to the people who suffer. He is a person of tender sensibility, anticipating Christian compassion. "To him," Goldstein writes, "Wilder assigns the task of carrying into Greek society the new-almost radically new-attitude toward humanity which tempers one's judgment of the individual with sympathetic understanding of the lot of man in general."<sup>40</sup> Obviously the character of Pamphilus is energized by the forces, which are unprecedented in Greek thought. His father Simo is well aware of these forces, as they create a chasm between the father and the son. Likewise the silent young priest of Aesculapius and Apollo is imbued with a distinct Christian spirit. As Goldstein further states, "Wilder implies that the pagan priest is a prototype of the self-sacrificing Christian priest of the future."<sup>41</sup> He goes on to add that "[w]ith the actions of these characters, Wilder attempts a distillation

of the Christian spirit of tolerance and forbearance and for emphasis places them in a pre-Christian setting."<sup>42</sup>

However, Wilder's intention is not merely to anticipate the Christian elements in the Greek world but something more. In reality, he wants, "to show the religious propensities of the Classical Greek humanistic temper."<sup>43</sup> Chrysis, by her thought, word, and deed is as much an embodiment of Christian values, as of the Hellenic culture. As Burbank believes, she, "symbolizes the spirit of Classical Greek culture."<sup>44</sup> For all intents and purposes, Chrysis is Socratic. She is not only well versed in the Socratic philosophy but also adheres to his approach to life and his spirit of inquiry. No wonder like Socrates, she remains thronged with a group of young disciples and is at odds with the society. Chrysis goes on to teach them the basic principles of life. With her, the youngsters come to realize that in order to live fully, they have to die to themselves. For true living, they have to rid themselves of the false self which is a bundle of self-assertion, of greeds, of vanities, and of pride. In this way she comes to introduce this Christian concept-dying to the self-in Greek consciousness. Likewise she goes on to inculcate the elements of love and self-sacrifice in a world which tends to forget them. Besides, she interprets suffering and meaning of life in Christian terms. "Someday," ... she says, "we shall understand why we suffer. I shall be among the shades underground and some wonderful hand, some Alcestis, will touch me and will show me the meaning of all these things."<sup>45</sup> Significantly she learns that love, virtue, and wisdom are the true values of life.

Obviously Chrysis' moral and humanistic vision is invested with Christian elements. Her humanism, which comes from the culture of fifth century Greece, is saturated with the affirmation of the values of human dignity. She wants that her values must have religious or philosophical sanction. However, there is no such sanction in old religions and pagan philosophy. Therefore she tries to seek this sanction in the moral values of real life of her contemporary world. "If only the gods were something among us. To have nothing to go by except this idea, this vague idea, that there lies the principle of living" (The Woman of Andros 155).

If in The Woman of Andros, Wilder seeks sanction for his moral values in the real life of the Greek world, in Heaven's My Destination (1935), he seeks this sanction in American life. In his new novel, he makes a concerted effort to locate religious certitudes and inculcate greater human consciousness of love in the lives of common people. However he conducts his search in a comic vein. Wilder dramatizes this search by portraying a tension between two opposite spirits: religion and the mundane existence; the saint and the materialist; and the humanitarianism and the salesmanship. One should not be surprised to find a spirit of scepticism, since the religious and moral principles are constantly questioned. Wilder presents his moral dilemma through his protagonists Brush, an embodiment of faith and Burkin, a representative of modern scepticism. With Brush, Wilder attacks the modern doctrines of human perfectibility and social amelioration as well as spiritual sterility and dry rationalism. He goes on to point out that the real enemies of humanity are

passions like fear, greed, and cynicism. Wilder believes that we should combat these forces on the lines suggested by Thoreau and Gandhi.

For locating moral values in American life, Wilder sets the story of the novel in the twentieth century America during the period of the Great-Depression. The narrative begins from the twentieth third birthday of the hero George Brush and terminates on his twenty fourth birthday. Brush is a very competent salesman for a text-book publisher. He is so efficient that even during Depression, when the national economy was in a poor state, he gets a raise. But in spite of his economic advancement, he wants to cultivate the Gandhian virtues of voluntary poverty, non-violence, and the ahimsa. He wants to be a Gandhian in thought, word, and deed. Brush goes on to follow his philosophy and inculcate his values of life. As missionary of the Gandhian ideals, he is opposed to smoking and drinking. He makes persistent efforts to persuade others to forgo these vices. Brush becomes so religious that he does not accept interest from his bank. However, his action is disapproved on fiscal ground. When the police intervene, Brush protests, "I didn't do anything. I just told a bank president that banks were immoral places and they arrested me."<sup>46</sup> Brush is quite earnest in his zeal for reformation by his own example. Nevertheless his ideal actions appear quite ludicrous in a materialistic society. As Goldstein states, "although Brush's principles are based on Christian morality and are therefore admirable in themselves, his hope of changing the world by his own example in living up to them cannot succeed in the materialistic, irreligious America of this century."<sup>47</sup>



The bank-episode is not the only episode which lands Brush in trouble because of his innocence and ideals. There are many others. Since the world in which he lives is not simple and innocent, he becomes an easy victim of deceit and exploitation. For instance, he is deceived by the buddies who are his companions in the shabby boarding-house in Kansas. After getting Brush drunk, they take him to a brothel. He is so enchanted by the beauty of the girls in the brothel that he takes them to the movies. In the end he is beaten so badly that he is taken to the hospital. However his encounter with buddies and girls does not make him wiser. Brush continues to adhere to his ideals of non-violence. When Louie tries to persuade him to change his ways, he refuses to listen to him. We can understand his resolution from his dialogue with Louie. To take a few excerpt from their conversation:

'Louie, tell me what's the matter with me?  
'you've no brains, that's all. God didn't give you any brains.'  
'I know.' After a breath or two he looked at Louie. 'What ought I to do about it?'  
'Sure. Snap out of it. Get awake. Get wise to yourself.'  
'Sure, I want to. I don't know how to go about it, that's all...  
There must be something serious the matter with me, because  
that's the third time people have suddenly hated me.....

-----  
'I want to say just one more thing, nurse,' he said, and shouted after the departing Louie: 'And if you must know, I'm not crazy. It's the world that's crazy. Everybody's crazy except me; that's what's the matter. The whole world's nuts.'

(Heaven's My Destination 85-86)

Brush also suffers for his Gandhian ideal of passive resistance or non-violence which enjoins that man should offer passive resistance to his enemy. He is convinced that passive resistance is the most effective instrument of

reformation. But his practice of this method lands him in trouble. Once Brush goes on to assist a hold-up man in robbing an elderly shopkeeper Mrs. Efrin by telling the hoodlum that she is hiding her money under a bolt of cloth. Here again Brush adopts a position which cannot be called normal. Although the dictates of ahimsa or passive resistance requires him to give the thief money and then set him free, his action cannot be approved by society or authorities. Naturally he is arrested and tried for his offence. Though the judge is quite impressed by his arguments, he does not acquit him. Rather he gives him a piece of advice in practical behaviour. Wilder reports the dialogue between the two in a lively way:

Judge Carberry put his hand on Brush's shoulder and stopped him. Brush stood still and looked at the ground. The judge spoke with effort:

'Well, boy... I'm an old fool, you know --- in the routine, in the routine... Go slow; go slow. See what I mean? I don't like to think of you getting into any unnecessary trouble... The human race is pretty stupid... Doesn't do any good to insult'm. Go gradual. See what I mean?'

'No,' said Brush, looking up quickly, puzzled.

'Most people don't like ideas. Well,' he added, clearing his throat, 'if you do get into any trouble, send me a telegram, see? Let me see what I can do.'

Brush didn't understand any of this. 'I don't know what you mean by trouble,' he said. 'But thanks a lot, Judge.'

(Heaven's My Destination 140)

While in Judge Carberry's jail, Brush shares the cell of Burkin, a film director who has been arrested as a Peeping Tom. Released at one and the

same time, they head across the country in Burkin's car. Like the judge, Burkin believes in compromise. But in his behaviour he is quite outspoken. He does not mince words in condemning Brush: "you're the damnedest prig I ever saw. You're a bag of wind" (Heaven's my Destination 146). Brush is quick to recognize in Burkin, the element of cynicism which he can not approve. Therefore he decides to leave him. In this way, "Brush's spiritual journey," as Goldstein states, "has taken him nowhere at all."<sup>48</sup>

Still adhering to his goal of social reformation, Brush now adopts another stance. He joins the current of common life of enjoyment. He begins to mix with girls. Though he responds with delight to pretty girls, he cannot continue with them. The slightest suggestion of a weakening in the flesh distresses him: "[H]e usually substitutes for profound feeling the exhilaration of the evangelical believer, writing Biblical texts on hotel blotters and telling the astonished passengers of railroad cars that cigarettes are an abomination. Nothing can break down his resistance to life."<sup>49</sup>

As wilder goes on to show, in spite of his idealism, Brush longs for a fine "American home" (Heaven's My Destination 32). His values of home life are decent and sound. His desire for home is essentially the desire to enter ordinary human society. But for this entry, he has to change himself. Subsequently, Brush undergoes an internal change. Brush decides to persuade a farmer's daughter Roberta, hoping that the marriage should enable him to find enjoyment in the present moment. He feels that the marriage is to provide him a spiritual union as well. Nevertheless Brush's hope remains a far cry. He

does not understand the true meaning of marriage which requires a loving surrender. Even though he promises many things to her, he holds back something of himself, as if not fully willing to entrust his entire personality to the girl:

He took her hand and said: 'It's going to be fine, Roberta. You'll see. What you'll want to do will always be the first thing in my mind. At first, though, I'll have to be away a good deal on the road, but I'll write you a letter every day. Later I think I can get the firm to give me the Illinois and Ohio territory. We're going to have a wonderful life together... You'll see. There'll be lots of times when we'll be laughing a lot... while we're washing the dishes, and so on... and soon we'll have a little house of our own. I'm very good at fixing things, like electric lights and furnaces. And I'm good at carpentering, too. I'll build you an arbour in the back yard where you can sit and sew. And Lottie can come and stay with us as long as she wants to. We could never find a better friend than Lottie... Don't you think it sounds... like it'll be fine?'

Roberta, standing with lowered eyes, said, 'yes.'

'I know I'm kind of funny in some ways,' he added, smiling, 'but that's only these earlier years when I'm trying to think things out. By the time I'm thirty all that kind of thing will be clearer to me, and... and it'll all be settled.'

(Heaven's My Destination, 159).

Evidently as the proposal reveals, Brush does not realize the part, played by love in the establishment of home. Since he does not love Roberta in the usual sense of the term, their marriage fails. The girl does not stand him and insists on separation.

These incidents – Burkin's denunciation and the failure of marriage – make Brush rather neurotic. As his health deteriorates, he enters a hospital in Texas. He suffers with so many ailments that recovery seems impossible. But

he is miraculously saved by the silver-spoon, gifted by a Roman Catholic priest, Father Pasziewski, who had died after a long illness. Brush comes to know about the priest from Queenie Craven, the proprietress of a boarding-house in Kansas City where Brush keeps a room. Though Pasziewski never met Brush, he had inquired about his health considerably on each meeting with Queenie. Because of this sympathetic attitude, the priest assumes "a mystical importance in Brush's life."<sup>50</sup> His sympathies rejuvenate Brush and enable him to recover quickly from his diseases. Subsequently he regains his old self and resumes his former activities.

In spite of Brush's recovery and resumption of normal life, Brush has no future. Though he continues his restless travels, he never settles in the home he longs for. Nor does he experience the spirit which might enable him to find love. As such he becomes a failure. His failure is the failure of his dogmatism in the twentieth century world, especially the American world.

Obviously, Brush's failure is the failure of his understanding and intelligence. Interestingly he does not possess enough intelligence, realize the true meaning of religion, and understand the true mentality of his fellow beings. He does not know the true meaning of marriage either. Brush fails because he is unable to have contact with his community. Explaining reasons of Brush's failure, Hermann Stresau writes:

Brush's lack of intelligence, or insight, causes him to misunderstand what religion is all about: he fights sin by trying only to remove its symptoms. He is not able to grasp the reality of his fellowmen; the moral rules of life that he urges on them are only abstractions. He does not realize that that is the reason he

offends. Because he cannot arrive at any self-knowledge, his life is a failure. Even his marriage, with which he tries to rectify a previous mistake and to found a genuine American home filled with peace and purity and uprightness—even this proves a failure. Occasionally he does actually help in desperate cases: he prevents a financially ruined man from committing suicide; he adopts the little daughter of his friend Herb, and the child loves him. But essentially he fails because he cannot establish contact with human beings.<sup>51</sup>

Although Brush fails, he shines in his failure. His actions might have been ludicrous and ideas preposterous; but they are not without their social significance and ethical values. His religious and humanitarian principles are realistic in as much as they draw substance from real life. As Rex Burbank points out, "they are humane."<sup>52</sup> Indeed, "he exasperates people almost beyond endurance, but he also helps some of them, even after they have mistreated him. He promises to take responsibility for the child of a dying man who has almost cruelly, abused him, for instance, and saves another from self-destruction at the risk of his own life."<sup>53</sup> According to Wilder, in spite of certain inherent weaknesses, human society "needs Brush and his values."<sup>54</sup> We should not mind that Brush is a man of emotions and sentiments and lacks intelligence. But he is a man of determination, prepared to combat the evil forces of fear, greed, cynicism, poverty, and social injustice. He is fully resolved to serve the spiritual and material welfare of the common men as well as to purge their ignorance and narrowness. In this way Brush shares something of the moral zeal of Wilder himself as well as of his father, his brother, and Genetunney. With his comical behaviour and compassionate

nature, he intends to instil the spirit of his mytho-religious ideas into American Consciousness.

In brief, Wilder's early fictional works- The Cabala, The Bridge of San Luis Rey, The Woman of Andros, and Heaven's My Destination, embody his early mytho-religious vision but with certain modifications in the area of form and technique. These modifications appear largely in the form of mythical structures used to underscore the values of religious humanism inherent in the contemporary American life. While retaining his love for moral themes of love and faith as well as classical and religious humanism, he goes on to expose the chasm existing between the classical and religious humanism. The earliest version of this modified mytho-religious vision surfaces in The Cabala, which is not a novel in the strict sense of the term, but a collection of stories. In these stories Wilder revives mythological figures like Jupiter, Demeter, Pan, Venus, Adonis, and Mercury providing them with modern names like Cardinal Vaini, Miss Grier, Marcantonio, Alix and Blair and the narrator respectfully. Investing them with a new spirit, Wilder goes on to yoke together the humanistic spirit of the past and the material spirit of the present.

The themes embodied in The Cabala, surface in The Bridge of San Luis Rey as well. However, these themes now assume a serious and transcendental tone and are presented in a religious and philosophical clothing. The novel based on an accident, the collapse of the bridge, investigates the cause of the death of the five travellers who had lost their lives in the accident. Wilder interprets the disaster both from the pagan and the Christian angle. With his

interpretation, he goes on to underscore the distinctive elements of Hellenism and Christianity (both Puritan and Catholic) and their relevance to modern human life especially the meaninglessness of its existence, the cold loneliness of the individual and his longing for security and love.

In The Woman of Andros, Wilder offers yet another version of his early mytho-religious vision in which he fuses the elements of Classical and Christian humanism. In the novel Wilder tries to underscore the Christian elements in the Hellenic world. He creates characters like Chrysis, Pamphilus, and the young priest of Apollo to anticipate elements of love, sacrifice, compassion, celibacy, and resignation which are central to Christianity. Furthermore with the identification of the Christian elements, Wilder confirms the religious proclivities of the Greek humanism.

Wilder's Heaven's My Destination as well furnishes us with another exemplification of Wilder's early humanistic religious vision. The novel as usual embodies his search for religious and moral certitudes. However he does not seek these certitude in the Hellenic world but in the American world of the twentieth century. Wilder creates a hero George Brush who is a perfect representative of modern American consciousness. His protagonist makes material gains even in that economically troubled period of the Great Depression. Though a successful American salesman, he is not a materialist but a religious man who continues to adhere to the Christian as well the Gandhian values. In spite of several repercussions, suffered during his practice of the Gandhian ideals of self-poverty, non-violence, and non-resistance, he lands



himself in situations, which are comical and tragic at one and the same time. But sufferings do not dampen his spirits. He does not relinquish his Gandhian faith and continues to live in the same vein. Wilder sees a silver lining in his failures. He believes that only persons like Brush can combat the forces of pride, greed, cynicism, ignorance, and narrowness which are the chief causes of human suffering in the contemporary world.

## Chapter Notes – 4

<sup>1</sup>Rex Burbank, Thornton Wilder (Boston: Twayne Publisher, 1961) 31: hereafter cited as Burbank.

<sup>2</sup>Hermann Stresau, Thornton Wilder (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1971) 14: hereafter cited as Stresau.

<sup>3</sup>Helmut Papajewski, Thornton Wilder (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1968) 1: hereafter cited as Papajewski.

<sup>4</sup>Thornton Wilder, The Cabala (New York: Carroll and Graf Publishers, Inc., 1987) 4: hereafter the book cited as The Cabala with paginations.

<sup>5</sup>Bernard Grebanier, Thornton Wilder (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1964) 13: hereafter cited as Grebanier.

<sup>6</sup>Grebanier 14.

<sup>7</sup>David Castronovo, Thornton Wilder (New York: The Ungar Publishing Company, 1986) 35: hereafter cited as Castronovo.

<sup>8</sup>Grebanier 12.

<sup>9</sup>M.C. Kuner, Thornton Wilder: The Bright and the Dark (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1972) 60: hereafter cited as Kuner.

<sup>10</sup>Castronovo 39..

<sup>11</sup>The Times qtd. Linda Simon, Thornton Wilder: His World (New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc. Garden City, 1979) 42-43: hereafter cited as Simon.

<sup>12</sup>Papajewski 7.

<sup>13</sup>Burbank 31

<sup>14</sup>Burbank 34

<sup>15</sup>Malcolm Goldstein, The Art of Thornton Wilder (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1967) 46: hereafter cited as Goldstein.

<sup>16</sup>Burbank 35

<sup>17</sup>Kuner 67.

<sup>18</sup>Thornton Wilder. The Bridge of San Luis Rey (New York: Albert and Charles Boni, Inc., 1927) 15: hereafter cited as The Bridge with paginations.

<sup>19</sup>Castronovo 44.

<sup>20</sup>Castronovo 46.

<sup>21</sup>Castronovo 46.

<sup>22</sup>Castronovo 47.

<sup>23</sup>Kuner 77.

<sup>24</sup>Hermann Stresau, "Wilder Thornton," Contemporary Literary Criticism, Vol.15 eds. Sharon R. Gunton and Laurie Lanzen Harris, (Detroit, Michigan: Gale Research Company Book Tower, 1980) 571: hereafter the article cited as Hermann Stresau and the book as Contemporary Literary Criticism with vol.

<sup>25</sup>Hermann Stresau, Contemporary Literary Criticism, Vol. 15, 571.

<sup>26</sup>Grabiner 16.

<sup>27</sup>Robert Morris, "Wilder Thornton," Contemporary Literary Criticism, Vol. 6, eds. Carolyn Riley & Phyllis Carmel Mendelson, (1976) 574: hereafter the article cited as Morris and the book as Contemporary Literary Criticism.

<sup>28</sup>Kuner 77.

<sup>29</sup>Victor White, "Wilder Thornton," Contemporary Literary Criticism vol. 10, ed. Dedria Bryfonski (1979) 536: hereafter the article cited as White and the book as Contemporary Literary Criticism.

<sup>30</sup>Goldstein 60.

- 31Goldstein 60.
- 32Burbank 46.
- 33Burbank 47.
- 34Hermann Stresau, Contemporary Literary Criticism vol. 15,  
572.
- 35Grabiner 21.
- 36Grabiner 22.
- 37Thornton Wilder, The Woman of Andros (New York: A. and  
C. Boni, 1930) 149: hereafter cited as The Woman of Andros with  
paginations.
- 38Grabiner 23.
- 39Goldstein 65.
- 40Goldstein 66.
- 41Goldstein 66.
- 42Goldstein 66-67.
- 43Burbank 50.
- 44Burbank 51.
- 45Burbank 51.
- 46Thornton Wilder, Heaven's My Destination (New York:  
Penguin Books, 1935) 22: hereafter cited as Heaven's My Destination  
with paginations.
- 47Goldstein 87.
- 48Goldstein 89.

<sup>49</sup>Goldstein 90.

<sup>50</sup>Goldstein 92.

<sup>51</sup>Hermann Stresau 52.

<sup>52</sup>Burbank 66.

<sup>53</sup>Burbank 66.

<sup>54</sup>Wilder qtd. Burbank 66.

## CHAPTER 5

### WILDER'S MYTHO-RELIGIOUS VISION IN HIS LATER NOVELS

In the preceding chapters, we have seen that Wilder's early writings, whether plays, novels or stories, embody his early mytho-religious vision. We have also marked how the elements of the Puritan morality received from his family and social environment, Catholic mysticism, classical humanism, and the contemporary American life played a crucial role in developing this vision, which eventually enabled Wilder to identify the moral and the Christian values in the Greek as well as the American worlds. It also inspired him to equate the American spirit with the Greek spirit and to prove that the contemporary American world embodies the perennial values of human life. On the whole, it gives him an opportunity to celebrate American life. It is this spirit which energizes the books written during the early part of his career: The Cabala (1926), The Bridge of San Luis Rey (1928), The Woman of Andros (1930), Heaven's My Destination (1935), Our Town (1938), The Skin of Our Teeth (1942), The Matchmaker (1955) etc. to mention only the important ones.

The celebration of American experience is central to Wilder's later mytho-religious vision as well. But this celebration now assumes new dimensions, especially the existential dimensions. While cultivating his later vision, Wilder does not relinquish the thematic patterns of his early vision.

Rather he goes on to reinforce them with the tenets of Existential Humanism and a new conception of Americanism. Besides, he persists with his classical and religious themes. But he, however, goes on to interpret them in distinctly existential terms of Sartre, Berdyaev, and Kierkegaard. This tendency surfaces in most of the books, whether plays or novels, written during his later career. As discussed in the third chapter, The Alcestiad interprets the Greek myth of Alcestis in terms of the Mystical Existentialism of Berdyaev. Likewise Wilder reinterprets the career of Julius Caesar in The Ides of March (1948) in terms of Sartre. He recreates the character of the Roman dictator in terms of an existential hero. In another important novel, The Eighth Day (1967), Wilder introduces the elements of Kierkegaardian faith to reinforce his religious views..

The Eighth Day is also remarkable for its new American spirit. Though American spirit always formed the central core of Wilder's consciousness, it has been never so strong as in the novels of his later period. Plays like Our Town and fictional works like The Cabala, had all along been imbued with intense feelings for America. But this feeling becomes all the more formidable in The Eighth Day and Theophilus North (1973). The feeling which in the earlier books had been energized by the transcendental vision of America, developed by Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman is further augmented by Gertrude Stein's vision of modern America, a vision which presents America as the best place for the pursuits of humanistic and moral values. The great transcendentalists combined to affirm the dignity of man and the

priceless value of life. They also stressed the value of artistic expression. Whitman maintained that the ideas of literature convey to provide its primary justification and purpose of life. "The culmination and fruit of literary artistic expression," Whitman wrote in a footnote to 'Democratic Vistas,' "and its final fields of pleasure for the human soul, are in metaphysics, including the mysteries of the spiritual world, the soul itself, and the question of the immortal continuation of our identity."<sup>1</sup>

The The Eighth Day is also conspicuous for Wilder's new attitude towards moral and ethical values. Retaining his faith in the Judeo-Christian and classical traditions, he goes on to reinterpret their values. But he now stresses only those aspects of old values which have withstood the onslaught of modern ideas and historical, political, and social problems. In The Eighth Day Wilder attempts "to address the fundamental moral issues of the twentieth century, when the values of the Judeo-Christian and Classical traditions have sustained their most devastating assaults by industrialism, Freudian psychology, state paternalism, the loosening of family ties, the depersonalization of human relationship, and the steady loss of meaningful connection with the past. Few writers in this century have undertaken such a Herculean task; fewer still could have undertaken it – lacking Wilder's combination of intellectual sophistication and narrative skill; only the best – Yeats, Joyce, Mann, Eliot – among those writing in this century have done better."<sup>2</sup>



Besides his later vision, Wilder retains his faith in his version of American hero as well. He continues with the type of puritan heroes who are drawn after him. His interest in the portraits of do-gooders does not seem to wane. It is only through the stories of the success and failure of these heroes that Wilder goes on to affirm his faith not only in American but in human life at large. This tendency surfaces at its best in Theophilus North (1973) in which Wilder creates a hero who is not only Wilder's alter-ego but also a representative of common man.

To begin with the best exemplification of Wilder's later mytho-religious vision can be found in The Ides of March (1948) which is not only his best but also one of America's best fictional works. The novel embodies in itself an amalgamation of Wilder's central themes: teleology, humanism, religion, ethics, American life etc. However, in the novel, these themes are treated in a new spirit provided to him by existential philosophy. In The Ides of March, one can spot the presence of a new American spirit construed by Gertrude Stein and an existential vision developed by Soren Kierkegaard and Jean-Paul Sartre. The novel announces not only the emergence of an existential hero but also throws a spot-light on such themes as religion, poetry, ethics, freedom, self-responsibility, social commitment etc. On the whole, from the thematic point of view, the novel is a reworking of a historical story in existential terms.

From the formal point of view "The Ides of March is a curiosity of twentieth-century literature: it is an epistolary novel, a historical evocation, a fantasia, and a series of discourses."<sup>3</sup> From the point of view of structure as

Hermann Stresau summarizes, it is, "divided into four parts of 'books,' based on the latter months of Caesar's life. Book One consists of material supposedly written in September 45 B.C.; Book Two, the second half of August, the whole of September, and most of October of the same year; Book Three, the period from early August to approximately mid-December 45 B.C.; and Book Four, the seven and one-half months from early August 45 B.C. to the day in March 44 B.C. when Caesar was murdered."<sup>4</sup>

Book I, which is concerned with the events of September 45 B.C., brings out the major conflicts in Caesar's mental life. It highlights his attitude towards such notions as choice, freedom, and religious scepticism. It also describes his distrust of the enemies of order especially malcontents like Clodius Pulcher and men like Cicero who are more fond of discourse than deeds. The section also incorporates Caesar's emergence as a man in search of liberating action and as an existentialist tyrant bent upon introducing reforms for bringing back the dignity and morality of the old Rome. It mentions the regulations initiated by him and his attempt to strengthen and dignify the religious ceremonies observed by the citizens. It also includes projects undertaken to establish the public libraries, the shifting of the course of Tiber, and the revision of the penal code. The section is also remarkable for the religious questions concerning the existence of the gods, state, religion, morality, and the central place of man in the universe, discussed in letters written to his friends. In one of such letters he writes: "I must be certain that in no corner of my being there lingers the recognition that there is a possibility

of a mind in and behind the universe which influence our minds and shapes our actions.”<sup>5</sup> The section also incorporates the answers, he finds to these questions from the suggestions made by the poet Catullus, while interpreting the legend of Alcestis. With Catullus Caesar comes to realize that it is impossible to distinguish between the spirit of the gods and the spirit of man. This realization renders to Caesar an experience of ecstasy.

Book II, which is concerned with the events of three months (August, September, and October) of the same year, explores the idea of love and the experience of the erotic relationships. The section tells us about the arrival of Cleopatra for whom Caesar has a strong passion. He is awed both by the beauty and wisdom of Cleopatra. Though impatient with her pretensions, he still finds her to be a woman of consummate allurements. She is the first woman since the death of his first wife Cornelia who has invited his attention. Caesar prefers Cleopatra to his other mistresses especially Clodia Pulcher, the “Lesbia” of Catullus’s poems and Cytheris, the mistress of Marc Antony. Clodia shares some of Caesar’s mentality especially the expectancy of life to come, the feeling of emptiness in the present moment, and the spirit of scepticism. As against Caesar and Clodia, Cytheris is a woman who is “content with the present.” As [t]he greatest actress of her time, she rests secure in the comfort of her artistry.”<sup>6</sup>

The section reveals that Cleopatra has come to Rome to establish the claim of Caesarian, her son from Caesar. Though drawn to her beauty, intelligence, her art of conversation, and exoticism, Caesar does not succumb

to her argument. He makes passionate but ambivalent responses to her. Obviously he is torn between his love for Cleopatra and his devotion to Roman order and progress. He does not accept Cleopatra's pleas, simply because he feels that she, like many others, is an enemy of order and progress. The section ends with Cleopatra becoming intimate with Marc Antony and is caught in a romantic situation with Caesar's nephew. This betrayal of Caesar by Cleopatra foreshadows his eventual betrayal by others.

Book III, incorporating the events from early August to mid-December 45 B.C., presents Caesar's thought on religion and the welfare of the state. It highlights the circumstances that surround the religious ceremony of the Good Goddess as well. The festival of Good Goddess is concerned with women, fertility, and the welfare of the home. Shrouded in mystery, it is remarkable for sexual licence and obscenity. Caesar, in his plan of strengthening the state through stern morality, wants to reform the ceremony and remove the objectionable rituals. Although he does not know the details of the ritual, he is anxious to introduce necessary changes in the ceremony. Nevertheless, he is defeated in his aim by Clodia who pollutes the ceremony by introducing her brother dressed as a woman. She not only defeats Caesar's purpose but also becomes instrumental in the death of Catullus with whom he was greatly attached.

This section also contains Caesar's reflections on the nature of his place in Roman religious life, his unwillingness to become a god or object of veneration, and his protests against the superstitions of his fellow citizens. "A

humanist in his belief in rational choice,” comments David Castronovo, “man’s limitations, and the ruler’s paradoxical strength in weakness, he presides over a state in which various fanatacisms and obsessions are beginning to overwhelm the polity.”<sup>7</sup> Wilder exploits this ceremony to demonstrate his metaphysics of hope and yearning. But in his metaphysics, he has no place for the values of stoicism, ordinary resignation, and superstition. Wilder’s Caesar does not want to submit but to collaborate with the inevitable:

I not only bow to the inevitable; I am fortified by it. The achievements of men are more remarkable when one contemplates the limitations under which they labor.

(The Ides of March 184)

In his experience of life, Caesar is not as much after love as after the intensity of life.

Book IV deals with the happenings from early August 45 B.C. to the assassination of Caesar in March 44 B.C. It sums up Caesar’s speculations in the first three books. It embodies his worries over the good of the state, new reforms and construction projects, questions of love and religion etc. The section also incorporates Caesar’s feeling for Brutus, even though he is aware of youngman’s alignment with the senators now conspiring to kill him. The book opens with Caesar’s ideas of sate-craft. It presents a letter from Servilia to her son Brutus. She has been a lover of Caesar who is eventually suspected to be Brutus’ father. The section shows how love has been the major tormentor in Caesar’s life. It has disappointed Caesar before – with Cleopatra on the night of the reception; with Pompeia, his second wife, after the profanation of

the rites of the Good Goddess, in which she appears to have been involved – and it disappoints him again when Brutus dismisses the proposal to think of himself as Caesar's successor. Besides love, Caesar is tormented by many more questions concerned with the problem of existence. He is caught in a state of uncertainty, with his mind hanging between a sense of the void and a sense of harmony and pleasure in life. Like many other protagonists of Wilder's works, Caesar the most powerful man of his time, is overwhelmed by his intense feeling for the trivialities of human life. He states:

Our lives are immersed in the trivial; the significant comes to us enwrapped in multitudinous details of the trivial; the trivial has this dignity that it exists and is omnipresent.

(The Ides of March 211)

The treatment of triviality has always been Wilder's central concern. It serves as an informing principle of The Ides of March as well. Besides the theme of triviality, the novel deals with such themes as human destiny, sources of human action, and mysteries of suffering as well. However, The Ides of March is more conspicuous for its existential concepts and vocabulary. To begin with, the novel remains one of the most magnificent attempts to create an existentialist hero in the realm of American literary consciousness. However, its hero, Caesar is not only the embodiment of existential consciousness but of something more. Interestingly, he has been created on the principles, laid down by Gertrude Stein, in accordance with her principles of identity and credibility. As Linda Simon observes, "The Ides of March is a study in identity. Thornton set out to create a portrait of Julius Caesar as a complex

personality, concerned as much with power as with his own mind. He portrays a sensitive thinker, a lonely man, a man who could feel great tenderness and pity. In contrast, he could also be cold and ruthless; he acknowledged himself as a tyrant. In creating his character, Thornton was again confronting two problems he had often discussed with Gertrude Stein: identity and the creation of a believable reality.”<sup>8</sup>

Besides the principles of identity and credibility, Caesar has a typical religious and mystical consciousness which is interspersed with a deep-rooted scepticism. Bernard Grebanier points out that, “(Caesar) is a man who lives for his public responsibilities. A foe to superstition, he has come to suspect religion itself. He is aware of the mystical operating in life, but with his passion for knowledge does not like to think of it; he wishes everything to be comprehensible to the rational mind. He would like to have a religion but his skepticism is too deeply rooted. ‘It is probable,’ he records, ‘that my last moments of consciousness will be filled with the last of many confirmations that the affairs of the world proceed with that senselessness with which a stream carries leaves upon its tide.’”<sup>9</sup>

Evidently there is an element of anachronism in the characterisation of Caesar. The concepts and vocabulary, which Thornton uses, are inappropriate in the sense that Caesar might have not phrased his problems in them. Existentialist terms and concepts are only of recent origin. However, one cannot fully understand Wilder’s Caesar without reference to the existentialist philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre and Soren Kierkegaard. Nevertheless, it would

be a grave mistake to treat him, as purely an existentialist hero. Caesar never entirely abandons his Christian faith. As Malcolm Goldstein states, in his creation of Caesar, "Wilder does not go so far with Sartre's philosophy as to present an atheistic Caesar, but he shows a Caesar profoundly in doubt."<sup>10</sup> Naturally because of his belief in divinity, as Goldstein adds, "his existentialism is closer to Soren Kierkegaard's than to Sartre's."<sup>11</sup>

Though closer to Kierkegaard in religious leanings, Wilder's Caesar is responsive to Sartre's social commitment and concept of freedom. He resembles the characters of Sartre who remain tormented in their life and develop a sense of hatred for their actions. In The Ides of March, we find Caesar pondering over the course of his life and the dangers it involves. However, he remains undeterred and continues to follow it to its inevitable end. Caesar becomes accustomed to endure hatred. As he writes in Book One:

Already in early youth I discovered that I did not require the good opinion of other men, even of the best, to confirm me in my actions... I hold that we cannot be said to be aware of our minds save under responsibility and that no greater danger could befall mine than that it should reflect an effort to incur the approval of any man, be it a Brutus or a Cato. I must arrive at my decisions as though they were not subject to the comment of other men, as though no one were watching.

(The Ides of March 34)

Caesar is a man of immense courage. His spirits are not dampened by the desecration of the Mysteries of the Good Goddess. Regaining his courage he writes:

Let me then banish from my mind the childish thought that it is among my duties to find some last answer concerning the nature



of life. Let me distrust all impulses within me to say at any moment that it is cruel or kind, for it is no less ignoble from a situation of misery to pronounce life evil than from one of happiness to call it good. Let me not be the dupe of well-being or content, but welcome all experience that reminds me of the myriad cries of execration and of delight that have been wrung from men in every time.

(The Ides of March 232)

These excerpts point out that Caesar knows life only by living it. He appears to be a thorough going existentialist, not only in his ideas of freedom, commitment, courage, and living but also in his attitude towards religion, divinity, and mystical experience. As for the nature of religion, Caesar believes that the elimination of reason even if partially, leads to religious and pseudo-religious consciousness. Caesar is also well aware of the value of state religion. He knows that the absence of state religion would encourage superstition. But he understands that the abolition of superstition might prove disastrous. However, these are only the peripheral elements of his religious consciousness. His central concern is to equate the process of religious purification to the existential elements of awe and the element of divinity, to human mind. He believes that the principal attribute of gods is mind. However, the mind is often covered by the forms of superstition. Caesar is an existentialist in believing, "that a man-made norm can never help illuminate the nature of the divine"<sup>12</sup> as well as in his faith that "[t]he road of revealing and veiling, as in great poetry or in love."<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, for Caesar, both poetry and love have special significance. As he finds in Catullus, poetry is a divine voice. He says in Book I:

poetry is indeed the principal channel by which all that most weakens man has entered the world; there he finds his facile consolations and the lies that reconcile him to ignorance and inertia; I count myself second to no man in my hatred of all poetry save the best – but great poetry, is that merely the topmost achievement of the man's powers or is that a voice from beyond man?

(The Ides of March 39)

Likewise, for Caesar love is also divine. Interpreting Caesar's idea of love, Helmut Papajewski writes, "Love can never be a human possession, much less a human property. Catullus, and Caesar once, have experienced it in a 'high noon,' and Cytheris has known it for fifteen decisive years of her life. In this period the relationship to the secret of the world is achieved; man has become conscious of awe, of knowledge in the Goethean sense, without being able to unlock the secret of awe himself."<sup>14</sup> Indeed Caesar's consciousness is informed by existentialist elements of awe and anguish. Nevertheless, it is endowed with a certain mystical illumination. Interestingly, in the moments of illumination, he has the experience of a divine-sickness which involves a sense of emptiness. This emptiness does not render merely the experience of void but of an inner harmony as well:

This nothingness, however, does not present itself to us as a blank and a quiet, but as a total evil unmasked. It is at once laughter and menace. It turns into ridicule all delights and sears and shrivels all endeavor. This dream is the counterpart of that other vision which comes to me in the paroxysm of my illness. Then I seem to grasp the fair harmony of the world. I am filled with unspeakable happiness and confidence. I wish to cry out to all the living and all the dead that there is no part of the universe that is untouched by bliss.

(The Ides of March 231)

Evidently Wilder accepts existentialism not as it is but with certain modifications, relevant to his mytho-religious vision. His existentialism is not a pale copy of the existentialism of either Sartre or Kierkegaard. On the whole, The Ides of March, as Goldstein believes, "is the most comprehensive literary exposition of the existentialist conception of life created thus far in America. It is not a primer for study in Sartre's school of thought and is not uncritical of that school, but it takes effect as a probing analysis of what is still the most firmly entrenched system of belief to be disseminated since the Second World War."<sup>15</sup>

The The Eighth Day (1967) embodies yet another version of Wilder's later mytho-religious vision, incorporating all the characteristic elements like mysticism, religion, Americanism, democratic culture, existentialism, humanism, philosophy, destiny etc. According to Richard H. Goldstone, The Eighth Day, "is a mystery novel like the Russian novel The Brothers Karamazov."<sup>16</sup> With the Russian novel, it shares yet another characteristic quality i.e. the element of local colour. Goldstone goes on to add that, "just as The Brothers is essentially Russian, The Eighth Day is essentially American, one of the most consciously American novels written in this century."<sup>17</sup>

As for the mystical element, we can refer to its enigmatic title which underscores the importance of number seven in the Bible. "For a writer," states Helmut Papajewski, "who stands as close as Wilder does to religious tradition, the number seven has significance as the number of the Biblical days of creation including the Lord's day of rest. At the same time, Wilder is

probably not unaware that the number seven was genetically a fixed element of the tradition of the Semitic peoples, and that also in later times this number was the departure point for sometimes colorful and bizarre speculations."<sup>18</sup> However, mystical element informs not merely the title but also the story. It also surfaces in the form of what David Castronovo's terms as "metaphysical meditation," and the "mysterious unity," found in human life.

Coming to Americanism The Eighth Day portrays a vision of multitudinous America: the Calvinist America, the America of puritan values, of Emersonian enlightenment; Whitmanian democratic vistas; of transcendental individualism; and of the America of peace and progress. Robert Morris writes that in the form of The Eighth Day, "(Wilder) had written a novel glorifying individualism, the concept of the American that haunted Emerson and Thoreau; his novel also celebrated the American soil, which nurtured and fostered individualism..."<sup>19</sup> The individualism, celebrated in the novel is sustained by Transcendentalism of Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman which entails a strong belief in the human capacity for improvement. At the same time, Wilder's individualism retains its faith in Calvinism, modified and reinforced by the great Transcendentalists and their predecessors. "Like Emerson, Channing, and Parker a century before," writes Burbank, "Wilder combines a transformed Calvinistic consciousness of the human potential for evil with a belief that men and women have the freedom to act upon nobler impulses."<sup>20</sup>

Wilder's Americanism is energized by the Calvinistic beliefs as well as its virtues of responsibility, industriousness, independence, morality, and social service that provide a well defined purpose to the Americans, "by discovering and developing their native gifts or talents and putting them to constructive use; and (by emphasizing That) they have a great capacity for love, self-sacrifice, and dedication to the alleviation of suffering."<sup>21</sup>

To elaborate, the religious vision unfolded in The Eighth Day, is inspired by the Emersonian Enlightenment and celebrates the triumph of the American democratic ideal for which Whitman aspired. Whitman's vision enables Wilder to give shape to his own vision. No wonder that he, like Whitman, produces a vision, as Rex Burbank believes, of "hope mixed with foreboding."<sup>22</sup> He further adds: "The possibilities of a great democratic culture exist, and they may be realized if those endowed with superior sensibilities and intelligence prevail and put the best that has been thought and said into active use; otherwise, the United States, like Coaltown, will have its brief day and pass, spiritually and physically spent into history as a failure."<sup>23</sup> Besides enlightenment, individualism, and democracy, Wilder's vision in the novel has a stamp of Kierkegaard's conception of faith and Wilder's own experience and ideas, especially his new outlook as an American writer. According to Morris, "[h]aving been caught wearing his heart on his sleeve, Wilder, the ardent young cosmopolitan writer, transformed himself into a detached observer of the American scene, an action which metamorphosed him into a sage and

philosopher, a servant of his government and spokesman for his country's institutions."<sup>24</sup>

Obviously Wilder's vision is informed both by the consciousness of the past and the concern for the fundamental issues of the modern life, vitiated by industrialism and modern ideas that have put a big question mark on the values of the Judeo-Christianity and Classical Humanism. At the same time, it exemplifies Wilder's interest in the deeper questions of life. These questions are incorporated in the plot of the novel which deals with the wanderings of its protagonist. "The plot thread," as David Castronovo writes, "concerns Ashley's wandering in New Orleans and Chile, his ingenious methods of survival, and his eventual vindication; interspersed with this is the larger philosophical search-essentially Wilder's pursuit of people's origins and the sources of their destinies. In six loosely structured chapters he studies two families – those of the victim and of the accused murderer – and their place in the universal order."<sup>25</sup>

The Eighth Day has six chapters, sandwiched between its Prologue and Epilogue. The Prologue embodies two important points: the ideological framework and the hint of the narrative. The ideological framework, goes on to enunciate his concepts of such notions as faith, religion, progress, heredity, environment, destiny, chance etc. The novel tells us about the murder of Lansing in the American mining community of Coaltown, suggesting that the deed was done by Ashley. Subsequently, it describes Ashley's trial, his escape, his sojourn in South America, break up of his family, success of his

son Roger as a journalist and his daughter Lily as an opera singer. The Prologue contains a sketch of Ashley's character unfolding the defining principles of his consciousness:

brought down upon him so mixed a portion of fate: unmerited punishment, a "miraculous" rescue, exile, and an illustrious progeny? What was there in the ancestry and later in the home life of the Ashleys that fostered this energy of mind and spirit? ...Was there a connection between the catastrophe that befell both houses and these later developments? Are humiliation, injustice, suffering, destitution, and ostracism – are they blessings?<sup>26</sup>

Interestingly, the Prologue narrates the story of Coaltown in the background of man's landing on the moon and gives reactions of the characters. These reactions set the tone of the story which goes on to describe the explorations of the Lansing and Ashley families. The first chapter covers the events between 1885 to 1905. It tells us of the rehabilitation as well as the disintegration of Ashley family. The chapter elaborates how after Ashley's conviction, the house had been turned into a boardinghouse. It goes on to disclose that one of the Ashley sisters, Lily, falls in love with Ladislav Malcolm who comes to lodge in the boardinghouse. Although Malcolm is married, Lily feels that she cannot live without him. Subsequently, when he leaves for Chicago, she follows him hoping that she would make a career for herself as a singer. Her brother also decides to go to Chicago to seek his fortune.

The second chapter portrays Ashley's fugitive life in retrospect. After his flight to Chile Ashley's suffers a sea-change. Cultivating a new attitude towards life, he now loses his faith in Christianity and no longer believes in the

Christian idea of submission to the will of God. However, Ashley's newly gained atheism makes him rather more superstitious. The chapter goes on to chronicle Ashley's escape, his adventures, and encounters especially with Maria Icaza, a fortune-teller who goes on to inform him: "When God loves a creature He wants the creature to know the highest happiness and the deepest misery – then he can die. He wants him to know all that being alive can bring. That is his best gift... There is no happiness for those who have not looked at the horror and the nada."<sup>27</sup> The chapter includes Ashley's experience as a witness to various types of human suffering, their causes, and the role of evil in the world. These sufferings make the narrator reflect on the problem of evil: "the world was a place of cruelty, suffering, and confusion, but men and women could surmount despair by making beautiful things, by emulating the beauty of the first creation... We do not know why we suffer, we do not know why millions and millions of people suffer... But only those who have suffered ever come to have a heart that is wise."<sup>28</sup>

Continuing with Ashley, the third chapter portrays his interest in the Chilean people and his role in raising a Catholic Church. It shows how Ashley works to improve the mental and moral conditions of the people and the influence of an old woman's faith on his character and his view of life. Besides, it describes Ashley's departure to another country, his subsequently death by drowning and the way he has lived. While covering the same time-span as that of the second chapter (i.e. from 1885 to 1905), it gives an account of Ashley's children in Chicago. It shows how Roger works at various jobs, as



a night clerk in a hotel, and later as a bank messenger and a hospital orderly. Its focus is on the delineation of Roger's personality especially his rejection of the utility of college education, his desire to understand life, and his interest in books, "as a kind of digestive tablet that will help him assimilate what he has taken in."<sup>29</sup> The chapter contains the description of Roger's meeting with an Archbishop who tells him about some German missionaries in China as well as his spiritual, ethical, philosophical, and intellectual encounters with important persons. It also describes his meetings with women especially with his sister Lily and her teacher who tells him about the value of history as the record of man's failure:

History is the record of man's repeated failures to extricate himself from his incorrigible nature. Those who see progress in it are as deluded as those who see a gradual degeneration. A few steps forward, a few steps back. Human nature is like the ocean, unchanging, unchangeable. Today's calm, tomorrow's tempest – but it's the same ocean. Man is as he is, as he was, as he always will be...

(The Eighth Day 234)

Besides the life of Roger, the third chapter gives us an account of Lily's life in Chicago. The Ashley girl, who has had an illegitimate child by Malcolm, her boy-friend, is a woman of new ("now") generation. She does not believe in the religious and social institutions. Lily is convinced that marriage is a worn-out custom like owning slaves or adoring royal families. Nevertheless, Lily believes in the value of love. She tells her brother how their missing father loved people and how their mother loved him (their father). Roger evinces keen interest in Lily's views. The chapter ends with Roger's

accidental meeting with Felicite Lansing, the daughter of the murdered man and his decision to marry her for brining together the two families that had been split by tragedy.

The fourth chapter spans just one year i.e. 1883. It is devoted to Ashley's wife Beata who loved her. Even though the daughter of a snobish and bullying woman, she understands the efficacy of love. No wonder she loved her husband silently but intensely. Tired of the parental tyranny, she had eloped with the young John Ashley who selected her for him very carefully. However, they lived as man and wife and raised a family without formal marriage. The bond that existed between them was very interesting. "Even if their relationship was an imperfect one," writes M.C. Kuner, "it had reality – the kind Alcestis comes to appreciate in her marriage to Admetus."<sup>30</sup>

The fifth chapter, which covers the period from 1880 to 1905, studies the members of the Lansing family, especially Lansing's wife Eustacia, a Creole of good family. Falling in love with the handsome and charming Breckenridge Lansing, she marries him. Interestingly, Eustacia is a contrast to Beata. While Beata is gifted with a magic voice, ("the child of the ear"), Eustacia is the mistress of color and design ("a child of the eye"). Any way Eustacia is not happy with her husband who has disappointed her immensely. Regretting her life, she goes on to reflect: "Everything is mysterious, but how unendurable life would be without the mystery" (The Eighth Day 292). On her part Breckenridge is empty headed and a fraud. His character has been shaped by his circumstances. He was brought up by a father who did not understand

him. Subsequently, he has become incapable of understanding others including his wife. But when he falls ill, Eustacia devotedly looks after him. She comes to understand her husband in a way she never could before. While nursing him she realizes that, "[w]e came into the world to learn" (The Eighth Day 312). Just before his death, Breckenridge also has his moment of illumination, as did John Ashley before he was drowned a sea.

The sixth chapter, though covering only the Christian season of 1905, contains a great deal of information and solutions. Exploiting the symbolic importance of the ritual season of the Christmas, as an instrument of bringing together a scattered family, it reveals the secret of Breckenridge's murder. To resume the story, Roger Ashley takes the train home from Chicago to visit his mother. Envisioning train as a symbol of life his consciousness moves to and fro in the labyrinths of human history, covering past, present, and future. It unfolds the story of his sister Constance's marriage with a Japanese diplomat and her crusade for women's rights; Lily's illegitimate children and her fame as an opera singer; Sophia's vocation as a nurse; and his own fame as a writer. The narrator suggests that all these happenings were the result of the miscarriage of justice or the wrong imprisonment of their father. The narrator reveals that Breckenridge was murdered not by John Ashley but by his own son George Lansing. The son murdered his father as he was afraid that his father would harm his mother in one of his violent mad rages. The turn of the events takes George to Russia where he eventually becomes an actor. He never returns to America to tell the truth of Breckenridge's murder.

The mystery of Roger's escape is revealed by the Deacon of the Covenant Church of Coaltown. The Deacon brings the letter left by John for his son Roger in which he tells him that the men (belonging to the Covenant Church) had rescued him. The Covenant people have a symbolic significance in as much as they claim to have descended from Abraham Lincoln, who freed the slaves. Eventually both the Deacon and the narrator, affirm that there is not only one Messiah as the Jews and Christian suppose. Every human being is a potential Messiah: "Every man and woman is Messiah-bearing, but some are closer on the tree to a Messiah than others" (The Eighth Day 376).

The conclusion of the chapter incorporates narrator's reflections on hell, Americans' suppression of the Red-Indians, and the role of history in human life. For him hell is the place without hope or possibility of change. He questions America as a place of destiny: "Is American, who so wronged the Indian, singled out for so high a destiny?" As for history, he offers a new definition. "History is one tapestry. No eye can venture to compass more than a hand's-breadth..." (The Eighth Day 381). It is precisely with this view of history that Wilder outlines the theme of the novel.

The mytho-religious vision enunciated in The Eighth Day, is multidimensional and inclusive in the sense that it is saturated with the articles of faith, central to Wilder. The most important thing in the novel is its protagonist John Ashley who is an embodiment not only of the author but also of the Kierkegaardian hero and Thoreau. While discussing The Eighth Day as the most autobiographical novel, Gilbert A. Harrison marks a number

resemblances between the protagonist of the novel and his creator as well as between their families. However, from the thematic point of view, the most important point is the presence of the characteristics of the Kierkegaardian hero in Ashley. As Edward Ericson points out, there are, "striking parallels between Ashley (and) Kierkegaard's knight of faith in Fear and Trembling."<sup>31</sup> This presence has been acknowledged by Wilder himself in a letter (dated April 24, 1971) to Ericson in response to his query: "yes, indeed John Ashley is a sketch of Kierkegaard's Knight. Once one had read S.K. he remains a part of one's view of life and I'd like to think that he appears and disappears throughout the book even when I'm not aware of it. Many have noticed also the presence of Teilhard de Chardin – very few have glimpsed S.K."<sup>32</sup>

Wilder reinforces the Kierkegaardian conception of faith by his own views of Christian faith and religion. Besides, the novel offers him an opportunity to voice his newly gained atheism and his views on superstition. But there is hardly an explicit enunciation of Christianity. There are attempts only to define faith and its relationship with religion. Wilder conceives of religion and faith as interdependent entities. He says that, "religions are merely the garments of faith."<sup>33</sup> Obviously Wilder is not keen to develop a precise definition of religion. According to Helmut Papajewski, "[h]e does not attach himself firmly to a religion, but he does make it plain that man's constitutive qualities may find in religions their forms of expression. In the structure of the story this theme is seen, for example, in the fact that Ashley

helps to build a church in Coaltown for a sect to which he does not even belong, and in Chile a church for the Catholics.”<sup>34</sup>

Interestingly, Ashley betrays a marked influence of Saint James and Henry David Thoreau. Gilbert A. Harrison rightly points out that in his mission to Chile and subsequent drowning, he parallels the legend of Saint James. Harrison goes on to state that “[t]he protagonist of The Eighth Day shares with Thoreau modes of behavior that we associate with American individualism: inventiveness, ingenuity, and manual dexterity; indifference to religious dogma and organized Christianity, but belief in the intuitive self as the true source of moral law; energetic optimism; an abiding love of children together with a capacity for gaining their trust, respect, and friendship.”<sup>35</sup>

However, apart from the treatment of faith and religion Wilder’s focal point in The Eighth Day is the spiritual awakening of the principal characters. Both Ashley and Breckenridge, achieve a state of illumination. According to Rex Burbank, Ashley achieves this state by social service and creative work. He observes: “As a ‘man of faith,’ he undergoes a spiritual journey as he moves from one place to another in the Andes, and as an engineer, he restores meaning to his life through bringing his knowledge into the service of others. He rebuilds a dilapidated chapel, repairs the plumbing and constructs shelves in an orphanage, restores and improves school and hospital buildings. Work, creative work directed toward making life better for others, gives meaning to his life once more and brings him a measure of happiness again.”<sup>36</sup> Likewise,

as mentioned earlier Breckenridge has moments of vision, just before his death.

Evidently, Wilder's religious vision in The Eighth Day assumes mystical dimensions as he underscores a mysterious unity in American life. It is also mystical, as its title denotes a new beginning and a new action. As usual the novel shows a marked concern for human destiny disclosed through common life. It also contains the mysterious element of continuity. "The book," writes David Castronovo, "comes to be about the organic filaments that connect the deeds of one generation with those of another. Wilder – without a tincture of irony or a measure of distance – is involved with the way young Ashleys work out the family destiny by rising to distinction in their careers."<sup>37</sup>

Wilder's next novel Theophilus North (1973), written at the fag-end of his literary career, is not central to his mytho-religious vision. It has only a peripheral importance in as much as it embodies only a few elements of his vision. Though it displays the elements of existential commitment and spiritual affirmation of life, it does not treat them in a comprehensive way. Nevertheless, in the novel presents yet another version of Wilder's hero who is not only the incarnation of young Thornton but also a prototype of his earlier heroes like Dolly Levi, George Brush, and John Ashley. From the very outset North appears as a fully committed man who wants to involve himself in the life around him. He is dissatisfied with his present job simply because he does not find enough opportunity to immerse in life. Wilder gives us a brilliant portrait of a man who is so eager to involve himself with people:

It was not clear to me what I wanted to do in life. I did not want to teach, though I knew I had a talent for it; the teaching profession is often a safety-net for just such indeterminate natures. I did not want to be a writer in the sense of one who earns his living by his pen; I wanted to be far more immersed in life than that. If I were to do any so-called "writing," it would not be before I had reached the age of fifty. If I were destined to die before that, I wanted to be sure that I had encompassed as varied a range of experience as I could – that I had not narrowed my focus to that noble but largely sedentary pursuit that is covered by the word "art."<sup>38</sup>

Since Wilder is essentially a moral soul, he relishes public service. It is therefore, no wonder that he energizes his heroes with the spirit of social service. North is no exception. He always involves himself in social work. Rex Burbank observes that he, "finds a kind of spiritual therapy in getting involved with individuals who need his help."<sup>39</sup> Gilbert A. Harrison also subscribes to this view, when he says that the novel is an embodiment of Wilder's philanthropic aspect of his life. It is this ennobling spirit of philanthropy which informs the character of North as well. Throughout his life, he (North) remains committed to people who suffer and who need his services.

Theophilus North's, spirit of social commitment and public service surfaces in his nine ambitions: "to be a saint, an anthropologist, an archaeologist, a detective, an actor, a magician, a lover, a rascal, and a free man."<sup>40</sup> We should not be surprised by North's visits to the homes of psychologically and socially troubled people of different sections. We also find him journeying through Newport's "Nine Cities" from patrician homes to those of "the nouveau riche" and working people. He does so to uncover, "in



the manner of the archaeologist- cum-psychoanalyst, the illnesses that appear to the rest of the world as either mysteries or eccentricities."<sup>41</sup>

As a social activist, Theophilus North does everything possible to mitigate suffering and to develop understanding among people. He endeavours hard to remove illness and eradicate social and moral evils like, "pride of rank, haunted houses, aristocratic loneliness, oversensitivity, adolescent snobbishness, prudery, isolation, childlessness, migraine headaches, and class restrictions."<sup>42</sup> Though North is determined to reform society and inculcate moral values, he does not allow his moral will to cloud his zest for life and fun. Wilder's intention is not only to instil morality in society but also to enliven it. Naturally Theophilus North becomes an embodiment of gaiety. It is, as Rex Burbank observes, "calculated to be a kind of literary festival, a happy affirmation of life. Like his other works, it is indubitably his, and if, as Wilder wished, the reader can join in North's fun – and in his desire to be 'obliging' – he or she can enjoy this series of episodes by an author who enjoyed life himself and wanted most touchingly to help his fellow human beings enjoy it, too."<sup>43</sup>

To sum up, Wilder's later mytho-religious vision perpetuates his celebration of American experience. But this celebration now assumes fresh dimensions in as much as it is suffused with the light of Gertrude Stein's Americanism and the existential aroma of Sartre, Berdyaev, and Kierkegaard. It is this vision which informs most of his books whether plays or novels, written during the later part of his literary career. Naturally it also makes its

presence felt in the novels written in the later years such as The Ides of March, The Eighth Day, and Theophilus North. As for the New American Spirit, he endeavours to revive the Transcendental elements of Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman and to wed them with Stein's love for everything American. So far as existentialism is concerned, Wilder tries to assimilate the ethical values of Kierkegaard, the political and social ideas of Sartre, and the mystical and religious ideas of Berdyaev and to fuse them with his version of Christianity.

The best exemplification of Wilder's later vision can be found in The Ides of March, which is not only Wilder's best but also one of the best American fictional works. The novel embodies in itself all the central elements of Wilder's literary consciousness, philosophy, humanism, Christianity, ethics, Americanism etc. It presents these themes in the refreshing light of the existentialist philosophy. The novel presents before us an existential hero in the form of Julius Caesar, who embodies in himself Kierkegaard's ethical religion, Sartre's social and political philosophy; and to a certain extent Berdyaev's religious mysticism. Interestingly, Wilder reinterprets the ancient story in exclusively modern terms and conceptions, supplied by the philosophy of existentialism.

Another interesting version of Wilder's later vision surfaces in The Eighth Day which incorporates all the qualities conspicuous to him viz. religion, ethics, mysticism, humanism, Americanism etc. In the novel, he uses the idea of new creation, giving it an exclusive American colour. He presents an America of Calvinistic beliefs and Puritan values, modified by Emerson's

enlightenment, Thoreau's individualism, Whitman's democratic vistas, and the characteristic American spirit of liberty, peace, and progress. Narrating the story of two families those of Ashley and Breckenridge, the novel deals with the questions of religion, faith, injustice, and plight of modern institutions like marriage. The protagonist of the novel John Ashley, is an embodiment not only of his creator's personal qualities but also of Saint James, Thoreau, and the Kierkegaardian Knight of Faith.

Likewise, in his third novel, Theophilus North, Thornton provide us with yet another version of his later religious vision. The novel does not focus its attention as much on existentialism as on some specific elements like social commitment, public service, and immersion in the life around. The most remarkable thing of the novel is its hero Theophilus North who embodies in himself not only the characteristic elements of his creator but also of his fictional predecessors like Dolly Levi, George Brush, and John Ashley. Obviously the novel deals with North's nine roles as a saint, an anthropologist, an archaeologist, a detective, an actor, a magician, a lover, a rascal, and a free man. At the same time, it highlights social evils and psychological maladies and hero's effort to mitigate them. In this way all these novels, The Ides of March, The Eighth Day, and Theophilus North successfully present Wilder's mytho-religious vision from different angles.

## Chapter Notes – 5

<sup>1</sup>Whitman qtd. Rex Burbank, Thornton Wilder (Boston: Twayne Publisher, 1961) 134: hereafter cited as Burbank.

<sup>2</sup>Burbank 122-123.

<sup>3</sup>David Castronovo, Thornton Wilder (New York: The Ungar Publishing Company, 1986) 126: hereafter cited as Castronovo.

<sup>4</sup>Hermann Stresau, Thornton Wilder (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1971) 75: hereafter cited as Stresau.

<sup>5</sup>Thornton Wilder, The Ides of March (New York: Grosset and Dunlap Publisher, 1948) 38: hereafter cited as The Ides of March with paginations.

<sup>6</sup>Malcolm Goldstein, The Art of Thornton Wilder (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1967) 136: hereafter cited as Goldstein.

<sup>7</sup>Castronovo 129.

<sup>8</sup>Linda Simon, Thornton Wilder: His World (New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc. 1979) 183: hereafter cited as Simon.

<sup>9</sup>Bernard Grebanier, Thornton Wilder (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1964) 41: hereafter cited as Grebanier.

<sup>10</sup>Goldstein 142.

<sup>11</sup>Goldstein 142.

<sup>12</sup>Helmut Papajewski, Thornton Wilder (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1968) 82-83: hereafter cited as Papajewski.

<sup>13</sup>Papajewski 83.

<sup>14</sup>Papajewski 89.

<sup>15</sup>Goldstein 144-145.

<sup>16</sup>Richard H. Goldstone, Thornton Wilder: An Intimate Portrait (New York: E.P. Dutton and Co., Inc., 1975) 247: hereafter cited as Goldstone.

<sup>17</sup>Goldstone 247.

<sup>18</sup>Papajewski 176-177.

<sup>19</sup>Robert Morris, "Wilder Thornton," Contemporary Literary Criticism, Volume 6, eds. Carolyn Riley & Phyllis Carmel Mendelson (Detroit, Michigan: Gale Research Company Book Tower, 1976) 576: hereafter the article cited as Morris and the book as Contemporary Literary Criticism.

<sup>20</sup>Burbank 122.

<sup>21</sup>Burbank 120.

<sup>22</sup>Burbank 122.

<sup>23</sup>Burbank 122.

<sup>24</sup>Morris, Contemporary Literary Criticism, Vol. 6, 577.

<sup>25</sup>Castronovo 136.

<sup>26</sup>M.C. Kuner, Thornton Wilder: The Bright and the Dark (New York: Thomas Crowell Company, 1972) 197: hereafter cited as Kuner.

<sup>27</sup>Kuner 199.

<sup>28</sup>Kuner 200.

<sup>29</sup>Kuner 201.

<sup>30</sup>Kuner 206.

<sup>31</sup>Edward Ericson, J.R., "Wilder Thornton," Contemporary Literary Criticism, Volume 10, ed. Detroit Bryfonski, 1979, 533: hereafter the article cited as Ericson and the book as Contemporary Literary Criticism with vol.

<sup>32</sup>Ericson, Contemporary Literary Criticism, Volume 10, 533.

33Wilder qtd. Papajewski 181.

34Papajewski 181.

35Harrison 252.

36Burbank 118.

37Castronovo 139-140.

38Thornton Wilder, Theophilus North (New York: Albert and Charles Boni, 1927) 1-2: hereafter the book cited as Theophilus North with paginations.

39Burbank 124.

40Castronovo 118.

41Castronovo 118.

42Castronovo 119.

43Burbank 126.

## CHAPTER 6

### WILDER'S TECHNICAL INNOVATIONS TO UNFOLD HIS MYTHO-RELIGIOUS VISION

The perusal of Wilder's works reveals that he has unfolded his mytho-religious vision in great style. He is not only a literary genius but also a craftsman who invents his own techniques to articulate ideas and concepts, central to his consciousness. With great dramatic skill and innovative narrative power, Wilder skilfully presents his great themes of Christian morality, community, the family, life's simple pleasures, humanistic and existentialist values etc. in his optimistic and affirmative books. He uses both orthodox and unorthodox methods in his plot construction as well as character-delineation. Beginning with the old orthodox method in his early works, he goes on to make tremendous efforts to develop unconventional methods in later works.

Obviously Wilder's early plays like The Trumpet Shall Sound and The Angel That Troubled the Waters are not significant for their technique. Some of these plays show even Wilder's disregard for the stage-craft and a tendency to work under its limitations. Naturally some of his early plays cannot be staged at all. But in later plays, Wilder becomes stage-conscious and tries to refine his technique and style. He, as we find in Our Town, rejects naturalism and acknowledges the value of the artifice in the theatre as well. In his later plays, Wilder endeavours to embody his experience of the European theatre.

He goes on to integrate some of the staging devices and thematic concerns received from the continent, in plays like Pullman Car Hiawatha and The Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden. The most important of these devices is the introduction of Stage Manager who performs the role of linkman between the actors and the audience. Besides Thornton abolishes such conventional method as scenery and replaces it by chairs as the only props. Furthermore, he introduces stylized characters in place of individuals. Wilder goes on to use these devices in Our Town. He uses the Stage Manager as an omniscient narrator who, "jokes with the audience, and, through his philosophizing, explicitly connects the people of the small New Hampshire town of Grover's Corners with the universe as a whole."<sup>1</sup> Again he discards scenery as a background. Wilder continues with his endeavours of refining the stage devices in the light of new ideas. In the plays, like The Skin of Our Teeth and The Matchmaker, Wilder blends conventional methods with the unconventional ones. In The Skin of Our Teeth, he manipulates modern conception of mental time in order to show the simultaneous occurrence of events from different time periods. He also uses the devices of juxtaposition of events and theatricality to reinforce dramatic effect. For all these technical experiments, Wilder came to be known as an innovator in American drama.

Likewise in his novels, Wilder goes on to introduce new thematic and structural patterns. In both The Cabala and The Bridge of San Luis Rey, he adopts new techniques. For example while in The Cabala, he gives full play to his mind and blends his imaginative experience with the autobiographical



experience. In The Bridge of San Luis Rey, he uses the background of the eighteenth-century Peru to ask certain religious questions. Besides, he goes on to develop a clear prose style and to frame a new religious philosophy. In the subsequent novels, like The Woman of Andros and Heaven's My Destination, Wilder uses different backgrounds to highlight his religious and social views. However, in spite of Wilder's preoccupation with technique, we are not so much concerned with his stage-craft and narrative skills, as with his modes or literary terms which he uses to express his central themes. Since our focal point is Wilder's mytho-religious vision, we are more attentive to his use of analogy, allegory, and myth as the literary instruments used to articulate his mytho-religious vision.

Let us begin our discussion of Wilder's use of these literary instruments by developing a working definition of the terms. Analogy, as Compact Oxford Reference Dictionary explains, is a literary device of comparison. It is, "a way of explaining something by comparing it to something else."<sup>2</sup> In literature, its function is more specific in as much as it is used to explain an unfamiliar idea or concept in terms of a similar and familiar one. That is to say, analogy enables the author to reveal the unknown by something known. As against analogy, allegory is a symbolic literary device. The Compact Oxford Reference Dictionary defines it as, "a story, poem or picture which contains a hidden meaning."<sup>3</sup> It presents objects, events or people in a symbolic way in order to convey a meaning other than and deeper than the actual incident or characters described.

Interestingly the mode is used to teach a moral lesson. As a literary instrument, allegory has two forms, fable and parable. "A fable," according to M.H. Abrams, "is a short story that exemplifies a moral thesis or a principle of human behavior; usually in its conclusion either the narrator or one of the characters states the moral in the form of an epigram."<sup>4</sup> Significantly the characters are animals and the subject matter is usually concerned with supernatural and unusual incidents, often drawn from folklore. A fable is also used to characterise any story that was once believed but is now recognized as untrue. Meanwhile, "a parable," as Abrams writes, "is a short narrative presented so as to stress the implicit but detailed analogy between its component parts and a thesis or lesson that the narrator is trying to bring home to us."<sup>5</sup> However, in a parable, the characters are not animals but human beings drawn not only from mythological sources or folklore but from common life.

Like allegory, myth is also rooted in primitive folk beliefs and is concerned with natural episodes, explained in terms of natural events and phenomena. The term "myth" is derived from the Greek term, "Mythos" or "Muthos" which means a tale. As such a myth is a story or plot (whether true or false) which is derived from racial mythology. The Compact Oxford Reference Dictionary defines myth as, "a traditional story concerning the early history of a people or explaining a natural or social fact."<sup>6</sup> As a story, "it differs from a legend, folklore, and fable. If the protagonist is a man rather than a supernatural being, the story usually not called myth but legend; if the

story concerns supernatural beings, but is not part of a systematic mythology, it is usually classified as a folktale.”<sup>7</sup> As compared to legend, myth has less historical background and contains more supernatural elements. It differs from the folktale in respect of its theme and the moral content. While the folktale deals with the relations of man and animals and concerns with the romantic adventures of human beings, the myth deals with the relations which have to be explained in terms of the sacred or the supernatural.

As compared to fables, myth is less concerned with teaching morality. Furthermore, it is not the creation of an individual like the fable but the creation of a racial or tribal group. In the variety of themes and philosophical content, myth covers a much larger area of human experience than the area covered by either legend, or folktale or fable. It deals with questions of greater philosophical significance like creation, divinity, and religion. The myth undertakes to explain the meaning of existence and death and goes on to account for natural phenomena and to chronicle the adventure of racial heroes. Interestingly, myths are divided in different categories. “[They] have been classified into those concerned with periodic changes and seasons, those dealing with natural objects, those seeking to explain unusual or irregular phenomena, those which deal with the origins of things and persons, whether gods, men, animals or natural objects, stories which relate transformations of men into animals and back again as the result of supernatural influence, stories about families and divine heroes, explanations of social institutions and inventions due to supernatural agency, such for instance as the origin of fire,

stories about demons and monsters (the bad sacred), and finally stories with an eschatological significance, professing to give information about the next life and the state of the dead.”<sup>8</sup>

For a writer like Thornton Wilder, analogy, allegory, and myth are crucial, since they enable him to exploit folk forms, mythic structures, and rituals to inform his mytho-religious vision. For him, they are the best instruments of projecting reality in an indirect and symbolic way. Wilder does not render direct reflections of contemporary life but wants to give only an indirect and symbolic representation of reality. As such symbolism becomes crucial for his creative writing. Though Wilder is influenced by the symbolist poets who draw their symbols from the religious and esoteric traditions, he has own sources. Obviously he opts for exclusively American symbols which he develops in the light of his own ideas. Wilder believes that “[e]very work of the imagination is a construction of symbols.”<sup>9</sup> He also believes that it is a means of expressing the whole. Wilder is convinced of the typical nature of American symbol, as the instrument of expressing the, “American sense of vastness and multiplicity.”<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, in his opinion, an American symbol is bereft of tradition, authority, and inherited patterns of thinking. He states that, “[i]t is not produced and developed for purposes of illustrating a moral generalization (allegory, parable), nor for the aesthetic pleasure of the orderly presentation of a parallelism (rhetoric), because the activity of stating a truth is not primarily a social one – for gratification, edification, admonition, or even instruction.”<sup>11</sup> In his opinion American symbol not only stands for a “self-

contained truth" but also assumes "cosmological, extra-rational, and non-tendentious" <sup>12</sup> form. Wilder goes on to add that, "since this symbol is cosmological and is not under any pre-established orderly mental pattern it is the whole work – being not an illustration of some fragment of the whole."<sup>13</sup> Besides it is neither, "reducible nor representable in any other terms than itself."<sup>14</sup>

Wilder uses symbolism not only as an structural principle but also as a device for characterization. In The Bridge of San Luis Rey, symbolism props the structure of the novel. It provides a meaning to the central event of the play i.e. the fall of the bridge. The fall is used as a symbol of "the force of circumstance or of the meaningless workings of nature."<sup>15</sup> As a principle of character-delineation, symbolism surfaces most prominently in The Woman of Andros in which the protagonist of the novel Chrysis symbolizes the spirit of Classical Greek Culture. Chrysis is not the only character to stand as a symbol. Almost all the characters of the book symbolize some or the other aspect of reality, physical, mental or moral. Sometimes Wilder's characters stand for more than one thing. For instance, in Heaven's My Destination, the hero, "Brush symbolizes both the best and the worst in the American religious and moral tradition."<sup>16</sup> Wilder uses symbols to underscore not only the individual characteristics and moral truths but also the human potentials. For instance, in The Alcestiad, Alcestis becomes "a symbol of what all men and women can do and be."<sup>17</sup>

Wilder excels in the use of analogy as well. For him, analogy comes in a spontaneous and natural way. It becomes one of his chief instruments of bridging the gulf between different realms of his experience. It enables him to identify American values with those of the Classical and Catholic worlds. We can have an idea of Wilder's use of analogy in Our Town in the dialogue that George and Emily have in their late teens:

Emily : I always expect a man to be perfect and I think he should be.

George : Oh... I don't think it's possible to be perfect, Emily.

Emily : Well, my father is, and as far as I can see your father is. There's no reason on earth why you shouldn't be too.

George : Well, Emily... I feel it's the other way round. That men aren't naturally good; but girls are. Like you and your mother and my mother."<sup>18</sup>

Emily and George are trying to feel good in terms of sabbath. Their serious talk marks Wilder's attempt to underscore the analogy between "bathetic attempt to feel good and the action recommended in the classic counsel: 'Be ye therefore perfect even as your Father in heaven is perfect.' Through this analogy he proposes to remind us of the Good, the True and the Beautiful in the Mind of God."<sup>19</sup>

Analogy serves not only as an instrument of characterization but also of plot-construction. In Our Town Wilder uses analogy to show how the individual becomes a microcosm of the universal (macrocosm) and how the deep-felt needs, desires, aspirations, and fears of the individual come to stand for those of the human race. To quote Burbank: "The little New Hampshire

town of Grover's Corners is Wilder's microcosm. His hero is human life itself; the universal forces acting upon it are Time, Nature, and Death; the forces acting from within it are Instinct, Love, Despair, and Apathy. Its scenes of daily life, love, marriage, and burial of the dead are the cyclical life-rituals of men and women in all times and places. The hopes and aspirations, the customs and habits, the happiness and misery its citizens think are so important - as Emily and George feel their marriage is important - are really not very important at all when considered in light of all the other human beings who experience the same things."<sup>20</sup>

Like symbolism and analogy, allegory and myth are also central to Wilder's creative technique. As for allegory, he equates it with drama. In his technical essay "Notes on Playwriting" he maintains that, "all drama is essentially allegory."<sup>21</sup> But he defines allegory only as "[a] succession of events illustrating a general idea."<sup>22</sup> It is an instrument of education which is used to teach the group mind indirectly. In spite of centrality of allegory to his art, Wilder's attitude towards allegory is rather ambivalent. For him, it is both fascinating and repulsive. In his Journal of May 7, 1947, Wilder writes: "I hate allegory, and here I am deep in allegory."<sup>23</sup> In the journal of November 27, he goes on to condemn it as, "the sorriest form of narration."<sup>24</sup> But even after condemning allegory Wilder goes on to use it as a dramatic form. His love for allegory surfaces as early as school days. His early works include, as Malcolm Goldstein mentions, "one long, elaborate allegory in four acts."<sup>25</sup> At the outset of his literary career, Wilder's fascination on for allegory spoils much of the

beauty of his plays and novels. For instance, in the opinion of Malcolm Goldstein, it is the "too obvious"<sup>26</sup> allegory, which is the chief cause of the failure of the plot of The Trumpet Shall Sound.

However, in later works, allegory greatly contributes to the success of Wilder's plays. For instance, both Our Town and The Skin of Our Teeth succeed because of their allegorical plot construction and characterisation. The allegory of the play has some distinctive moral qualities. According to David Castronovo, "[The] allegory of possession and justice, about what happens when servants take over their master's house, is interesting for its moralistic emphasis and its frank use of another playwright's material."<sup>27</sup>

However, the best exemplification of Wilder's use of allegory, comes in his plays Our Town and The Skin of Our Teeth. In both the plays, he uses allegory to unfold his Platonic religious humanism. In Our Town, he unfolds this idea in a rural background, while in The Skin of Our Teeth, he enacts it in a distinctly urban background. In Our Town, the background is provided by Grover's Corners, a village in New Hampshire. The plot revolves round the families of George Gibbs and Emily Webb. By delineating the characters of the members of two families, Wilder succeeds in projecting the questions, relating to such abstract notions as Time, Nature, Death, Instinct, Love, Despair, and Apathy.

Likewise, in The Skin of Our Teeth Wilder projects the perennial questions of human existence in an allegorical mode. In a plot closely analogous to that of Our Town, he articulates the story of humanity. He bases



his story on three major crisis of human history, "the Ice Age, the Flood, and War, correspond to Our Town's Birth, Marriage and Death."<sup>28</sup> Interestingly, the allegorical plot construction is substantiated by three-fold allegorical characterization. As Rex Burbank observes, "[t]he characters are all allegorical figures on three levels: as Americans, as biblical figures, and as universal human types. Antrobus – the middle-class American, Adam, and the 'father pilot' of the human race – has the general weaknesses and virtues of humanity in general of all times."<sup>29</sup>

In The Woman of Andros this allegory operates on two levels, the moral and the historical. These levels enable Wilder to show the religious propensities of the Classical Greek humanistic culture. Though Wilder's aim is to unfold ideas, his allegory cannot be equated with the "old-fashioned thesis – play, in which the thesis is directly discussed and supposedly proved to the satisfaction of all parties to the dispute."<sup>30</sup> Rejecting the outdated allegorical mode of thesis play, Wilder goes on to develop an existentialist allegory. The first exemplification of this form can be traced in The Ides of March in which he delineates the character of the hero in terms of Sartre and Kierkegaard. Caesar, in his character, embodies not only the elements of atheism of Sartre but also the faith of Kierkegaard. With the help of Caesar's personality and vision, Wilder underscores the presence of existentialist ideas in the Roman world. However, Wilder's best exemplification of an existentialist allegory appears in The Alcestiad, which embodies the central ideas of Sartre, Kierkegaard, and Berdyaev.

Rex Burbank interprets The Alcestiad as, "an existentialist allegory portraying the mystic's pilgrimage."<sup>31</sup> The writer adds, "[t]he vision is mystical in its portrayal of the union of Alcestis and Apollo in divine love; but it is existential in its illustration of the necessity of complete commitment to life in human love and self-sacrifice as the first step towards divine grace."<sup>32</sup> While the character of Alcestis is delineated in the terminology of Sartre, her journey is articulated in that of Kierkegaard. She is as a kind of spiritual legislator of mankind, like the heroes of Sartre. But her spiritual journey follows the pattern of the Kierkegaardian process of becoming. At the same time Alcestis as a character is Berdyaevian, being an embodiment of the union of human and divine. The existentialist form of allegory operates in The Ides of March as well. In the novel, Wilder delineates the character of Julius Caesar in terms of an existentialist hero.

Besides analogy and allegory, Wilder excels in the use of myths as well. He uses myth not only to unfold his themes but also to prop the structure of his plays and novels. In his opinion, myths are essential to all fictional writing and as such they are closely related to allegory and its constituents, the parable and the fable. In his opinion, myths go a long way to underscore the central idea as well as the moral element of a particular work. "The myth, the parable, the fable are the fountainheads of all fiction," he writes, "and in them is seen most clearly the didactic, moralizing employment of a story. Modern taste shrinks from emphasizing the central idea behind the fiction, but it exists there nevertheless, supplying the unity to fantasizing, and offering a justification to

what otherwise we would repudiate as mere arbitrary contrivance, pretentious lying, or individualistic emotional association-spinning."<sup>33</sup>

Interestingly, Wilder does not define myth simply as a mythological story nor does he treat it merely as an instrument of the promotion of social solidarity. He interprets it in a much wider connotation. Myth for Wilder, is a literary device which provides people a spiritual view of the world, underlining harmony, faith, and continuity of life. He believes that the myth underscores the harmony in society as well as in the natural world. It enables the writer to transform the ordinary experience into the sacred.

For Wilder myth, in combination with analogy, promotes not only the continuity of life but also its unity. It brings together the individual and the universal and visualises macrocosm [universe] in microcosm (man). As Rex Burbank states, "[a] myth puts specific characters, actions, and themes into a microcosmic relationship with the [universal] forces that act upon and from within men; it draws together past and present; and it provides an analogy by which deep-felt needs, desires, aspirations, and fears of the individual become an expression of those of all men."<sup>34</sup>

Obviously myth enables people to understand the inner working of the human mind, its nature, and its action to the world around. As an instrument of understanding human nature, it embodies in itself everything that psychology and anthropology have to offer. As a mode of literature, it is concerned both with human experience and the ethical principles involved in it. At its best, it goes on to reconcile moral element with experience. In his opinion, myths are

important not so much for the elements of supernatural and the incredible, as for the ideas they contain. It is the responsibility of the writer to relate these ideas with the contemporary life. To quote Wilder:

A myth passing from oral tradition into literature, moves most congenially into poetry and particularly into the poetic drama. Even the most rationalistic reader consents to receive as given the elements of the supernatural and the incredible that are involved in these ancient stories. Their validity rests on the general ideas they contain... The characters whom we have endowed with the life of significant ideas must be endowed with a different kind of life from the realistic - that of the recognizable quotidian.<sup>35</sup>

Interestingly, Wilder does not accept the anthropological and the psychical interpretation of the myth. He dismisses the historical and geographical explanations as well. He believes that myth is not important because of its extrinsic values but for its intrinsic intentions. It is important because it is an instrument of self-knowledge, individual as well as racial. The central elements of the myth according to Wilder,

are questions and not answers in regard to the human situation. In the majority of cases the questions seem to have to do with the mind disengaging itself from the passions of finding its true position in the presence of the established authorities, human or divine. They are concretizations of man's besetting preoccupation with the mind and mind's struggle to know itself; and each retelling requires that some answer be furnished to the question that infuses every part of the story.<sup>36</sup>

Significantly the value of myth does not lie in its psychological contents and in the details of experience. Its value is embodied in the questions which it raises and the temporary answers which it furnishes as well as in its effort to distinguish the eternal from the transitory. For Wilder myth as a literary mode has a specific character. It has its own way to deal with humanity. For him, "it

is peculiarly equipped to convey a generalized statement about human beings who seem themselves to be individualized."<sup>37</sup> Wilder is attentive only to the idea which the myth exemplifies. In this sense myth is so closely related to the anecdote that myth becomes synonymous with anecdote. "If, as Wilder believes, the anecdote matters only insofar as it illustrates that idea, then myth is the ideal anecdote because its general outlines are already known in some way to the audience."<sup>38</sup>

Evidently Wilder conceives of myth in rather spiritual terms, as something living that embodies the experience of humanity. In an essay on Joyce, Wilder has gone to the extent of defining myth as, "the dreaming soul of the race telling its story."<sup>39</sup> Wilder employs this dream of humanity to spiritualize everyday experience. He makes his protagonists suffer mythic transformation so much so that everyman becomes the incarnation of some towering figure of the mythic world. Wilder uses different kinds of myths, including the myths, invented by himself and the myths, drawn from other sources, as religion, history, and literature. The myths, invented by him, are interesting in the sense that they come to possess some type of living reality.

Among these myths, the most important ones are the myths, invented by Wilder in as much as they come to possess a life of their own and assume a classical character. The best example of this type, figures in the story of Emily's return from the dead. Though it is not a classical myth, Wilder uses it as if it were classical. Wilder goes on to reproduce this myth in The Woman of Andros in which Chrysis goes on to recount the story of Emily's return.

Besides inventing his own myths, Wilder develops myths by exploring contemporary literature. "He, like Pound and Eliot uses the writings of others as though they were part of the great body of ideas available to the entire human group, or in other words a myth."<sup>40</sup> The best exemplification of this type can be found in The Merchant of Yonkers in as much as the story of the play is based on the works of other writers. Furthermore, as we find in The Skin of Our Teeth, Wilder explores history as well to develop his myths.

Wilder's myth-making quality is visible in the entire body of his creative work. Almost everyone of his plays and novels are based on some or the other myth. However, the books which incorporate memorable specimens, are invariably Our Town, The Skin of Our Teeth, The Ides of March, and The Alcestiad. To begin with, Our Town is remarkable not only for the influence of Gertrude Stein but also of the myth of Emily's return from the dead. But "[T]he play unquestionably captures and portrays the essentials of a mythic vision that ties life in his New England village to the All."<sup>41</sup> This mythic vision is based on the assumption that the life follows the cycle of life and death. Though this life is a little pathetic, it contains an intrinsic beauty and moral order of love and zest for living. The mythic vision which this life offers exemplifies, "Whitman's ideal of an America that is a 'nation of nations' drawing its moral impulses and values from a transcendent view of the inherent worth of the individual human being."<sup>42</sup> Like Whitman, Wilder loves his fellow Americans despite their shortcomings. He clearly intends that his audience should also love them.

In his mythic vision of the life in the American village of Grover's Corners in Hampshire, Wilder tries to render the essential truth that the life of the simple people like Emily and George, is integrally related to the large scheme of things. Even though such simple people are not aware of their importance, they still enjoy the intensity of each and every moment that their life has to offer in the pattern of their life, belief, and enjoyment. Their experience achieves universal dimensions. By his myth-making qualities, Wilder thus elevates the quality of common life. "In making," states Burbank, "the little American town a mythical representation of civilized human life everywhere in all ages, he accomplished what he and Gertrude Stein conceived to be the main achievement of the literary masterpiece – the use of the materials of human nature to portray the eternal and universal residing in the collective 'human mind.'"<sup>43</sup>

The Skin of Our Teeth is all the more important for Wilder's myth-making qualities. In the play, Wilder presents a mythic vision of the urban life which observes the ideas of James Joyce, and Soren Kierkegaard. On the surface the play, as Edmund Wilson, Joseph Campbell and Henry Morton Robinson contends, appears simply a dramatization of Joyce's Finnegans Wake. However, the play has a much deeper content. Wilder not only Americanizes Joyce's story but also reworks it in the light of the existentialist philosophy. Through the story of the simple townfolk, Wilder narrates the central questions of human life relating to Birth, Marriage, and Death, which are universal and which exemplify the central truth of human life that, "we

have our being within the eternal verities, or the Mind of God."<sup>44</sup> The truth is unfolded in the three acts. In Act I, the protagonist gets ready to survive the Ice Age and insists on saving Moses, Homer, and the nine-Muses. Act II enacts a more sinister hint of the truth behind the heedless human life. Act III reproduces bits of wisdom from Spinoza, Plato, Aristotle, and the Genesis to proclaim God's love for man. Thus the play brings out the central truth of Platonic humanism, expressed through a mythic structure.

The Skin of Our Teeth is a typical example of Wilder's handling of the myth, received from literature. Interestingly, Wilder uses Joyce's Finnegans Wake to create a myth of the historical and cultural environment which created America. However, Wilder's play is not, "a rehash of Joyce's novel."<sup>45</sup> No doubt he uses the myth but goes on to modify it in view of the light of his American and Kierkegaard experience. Donald Haberman is right in pointing out that, "Wilder merely collected and catalogued Joyce's discoveries into an adaptation suitable to the Broadway temper. That he had studied and comprehended Joyce's work is certain; but he also succeeded in pervading the whole of his play with his own optimistic and peculiarly American vision of the human animal and his experience through time."<sup>46</sup>

Wilder while reworking the myth, completely transforms its spirit. Doing away with the pessimistic tone, he sounds an optimistic note. He goes on to portray the mythic American progressing cheerfully and intricately through the terrains of the western civilization. Furthermore, Wilder also goes on to create a new hero, the Religious Hero. Though he follows the pattern of



Kierkegaard's religious hero, he does not produce merely a photostat. For all intents and purposes, his hero is thoroughly American who is most intensely alive and intimately related with everyday existence. He has also a different notion of freedom.

The Ides of March is another specimen of Wilder's use of myth. The novel exemplifies how history can be used as a myth and how a historical personage can be elevated as an existentialist hero. While in The Skin of Our Teeth, Wilder creates religious hero on the pattern, set by Kierkegaard, in The Ides of March he creates an existentialist hero fusing the ideas of Sartre and Kierkegaard, and Berdyaev. By making Julius Caesar, the embodiment of modern existentialism, Wilder transforms him into a mythical figure symbolizing continuity and eternity. Interestingly, Wilder builds the personality of Caesar on the twin principles of loneliness and isolation which become at once the foundations of his strength and weakness. "His loneliness as ruler of Rome represents man's isolation in the universe and in the world. But that isolation gives him heroic potential."<sup>47</sup> Believing that isolation is the condition of all men, he turns it to his advantage. He goes on to gain absolute power and freedom and becomes the symbol of greatness, nobility, and the power of man achieved through suffering and commitment. Though in his freedom, ethical values, and social commitment, Caesar partakes the qualities of the hero of Sartre. He, however, does not share his atheism. As Burbank states, "Wilder presents a very convincing portrayal in Caesar of the existentialist ethical and metaphysical assumptions of Sartre; but he then

undermines the certainty behind those assumptions by affirming the presence of mystery, which compels a tentative attitude toward them."<sup>48</sup>

Caesar's recognition of the presence of the element of mystery in life, leads him to inquire into the meaning and nature of life. He becomes aware of the role of fear and awe which in turn makes him aware of the presence of an Unknowable. In this way Caesar comes to accept the faith of Kierkegaard and the mystical assumptions of Berdyaev. However, Caesar's acceptance of the principles of existentialism make him only a tragic representative of the human condition. "In living by the laws of the universe," writes Burbank, "he represents the condition of man; and, because he chose to do so, he is tragic. But the real essence of his tragedy is his excess in both isolation and responsibility, which has detached him from the aristocracy and generated contempt on his part and hostility on theirs."<sup>49</sup>

The Alcestiad is another brilliant example of Wilder's reworking an old myth in terms of existentialism. In the play, he treats it as a classical myth rather than a historical story. With great dramatic skill, he uses the ancient story to enact his central theme of living exclusively in Kierkegaardian terms of fear, awe, trembling, nonsense, faith, love, despair, and to paint the relation between Man and God. In the play, as usual, Wilder's focal point is the discovery of divine in daily life or what he describes in Heaven's My Destination as the sublime in the pedestrian.

To elaborate, Wilder engages himself to locate the idea of living which underlies all human life. This idea of living, he believes, can be discovered

only by knowing man's relation to the unknowable or the divine. This relationship entails several subsidiary ideas like intercession, despair, faith, submission, renunciation or resignation, self-knowledge etc. As for the human and divine relationship, Wilder portrays Hercules in terms of semi-divinity. The hero believes that the gods and men must act together. Such an act can be done in the manner of Christ who was human and divine at one and the same time. However, at the outset, Hercules is gripped by doubt. He questions his descent from Zeus and the role of the God in his achievement. This doubt creates in him two contradictory feelings of pride as well as fear and trembling. But ultimately overcoming the state of doubt, Hercules recovers his faith and solves the paradox of god's love to man.

Likewise, the question of the relationship between the finite and the infinite is also resolved by dramatizing the relationship between Alcestis, the wife of Admetus and the lover of Hercules. Alcestis is beset with the Kierkegaardian despair in her refusal to recognize the necessity for the finite, Hercules, on the other hand, is frightened by his relationship with the infinite. The riddle of relationship is solved "when Alcestis comes to learn the way and the value of daily living or finitude."<sup>50</sup> As for the way, she finds that love is the bridge between man and god. With this realization, Alcestis passes through a process of infinite resignation and compelling love. As for finitude, Alcestis learns that the lack of the idea of finitude entails the despair of infinitude. Explaining Alcestis' feeling, Wilder states that, "[t]he God-relationship infinitizes; but this may so carry a man away that it becomes an inebriation, it

may seem to a man as though it were unendurable to exist before God.”<sup>51</sup> Likewise Hercules comes to solve the riddle of the finitude when he asserts his humanity in his Platonic love for Alcestis and recognizes his relationship with God.

Interestingly, Wilder employs not only the ideas of Kierkegaard but also of Berdyaev. The existentialism of Berdyaev, identifies religious life with ethics and locates the divine in the human. Berdyaev's ideas are enacted through the moral action of Alcestis and Apollo. “The act of co-creation by Alcestis and Apollo is a change in the order of things in which Alcestis' moral actions are expressions of God's will: They bring the promise of a ‘new, ‘other’ world.’”<sup>52</sup> On the basis of aforesaid discussion, we can conclude that Wilder, like Eliot and Pound goes a long way to rework ancient myths in modern terms.

In short, Wilder unfolds his mytho-religious vision in great style. He uses an astounding variety of literary techniques, including the new techniques of stage-craft and narration as well as the literary modes of analogy, allegory, symbolism, and myth. As for the stage-craft, he uses the new devices for the portrayal of the background and introduces the Stage Manager as a character, taking active part in drama. Besides, he makes a subtle use of the modern conception of time to invest his plays and novels with deeper meanings. Wilder's experiments with stage-craft surface both in his early plays and the later ones. They are visible in the play like The Trumpet Shall Sound and The Angel That Troubled the Waters, which belong to his early career and in Our

Town, Pullman Car Hiawatha, The Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden, The Skin of Our Teeth, The Matchmaker etc. which belong to his later career. Wilder's narrative innovations can be visualized in his novels like The Cabala, The Bridge of San Luis Rey, The Woman of Andros, Heaven's My Destination etc. as well.

Wilder's technical skill is visible in his deft use of such literary devices, as analogy, allegory, symbolism, and myth. He uses these devices to yoke together two different realms of his literary consciousness, the ancient and the modern; the American and non-American. He endeavours to discover the thread which binds human experience and which underscores the continuity of life and its values. As for symbolism, Wilder develops exclusive American symbols which he uses more prominently in works like The Bridge of San Luis Rey, The Woman of Andros, Heaven's My Destination, The Alcestiad, Our Town etc. He uses analogy as an instrument of characterization as well as of plot construction. Its best exemplification comes in Our Town. Wilder also excels in the use of allegory as a device to inculcate the central truths of life. Though, in the beginning, his use of allegory is a little ineffective, since it spoils much of the beauty of his plays and novels. But later on, he reworks allegory in terms of the philosophy of existentialism to make it a literary weapon of immense power. Wilder employs allegory to exemplify the moral values which eventually is the chief objective of his literary efforts. The best specimens of allegory can be found in plays like Our Town, The Skin of Our Teeth and the novels like The Woman of Andros and The Ides of March.

Obviously more than anything else, myth is Wilder's best weapon of his literary armoury. Like Eliot and Pound, he reworks the ancient, religious, and classical myths as well as the myths, developed by contemporary writers, to inform his thematic and structural patterns. He interprets most of his myths in the light of the ideas, provided by Whitman, Gertrude Stein, Sartre, Kierkegaard, and Berdyaev. Although Wilder's myth-making quality is visible in almost all his literary works, its most memorable specimens can be found in books like Our Town, The Skin of Our Teeth, The Ides of March, and The Alcestiad. While in Our Town, Wilder's exemplar is Gertrude Stein, in The Skin of Our Teeth, his model is James Joyce.

Likewise in The Ides of March, Wilder goes on to give a prototype of a new American hero (existentialist hero) on the principles, supplied by Sartre, Kierkegaard, and Berdyaev. Their ideas also influence Wilder's reworking of the ancient myth of Alcestis, that dramatizes such central questions as life and living, the divine in the mundane, and intercession of gods in human action. Wilder uses all these myths to celebrate American life, as an embodiment of the perennial human experience.

## Chapter Notes – 6

<sup>1</sup>Contemporary Literary Criticism, Volume 35 ed. Daniel G. Marowski (Detroit, Michigan: Gale Research Company Book Tower, 1985) 435: hereafter the article cited as Contemporary Literary Criticism.

<sup>2</sup>Compact Oxford Reference Dictionary ed. Catherine Soanes, 2001 edition, 26: hereafter cited as COR Dictionary with paginations.

<sup>3</sup>COR Dictionary 20.

<sup>4</sup>M.H. Abrams, A Glossary of Literary Terms (Cornell University: (n.p.d.) 5: hereafter cited as Abrams.

<sup>5</sup>Abrams 6.

<sup>6</sup>COR Dictionary 557.

<sup>7</sup>Abrams 102.

<sup>8</sup>Cassell's Encyclopaedia of Literature (London: Cassell and Company Ltd., 1953) 372: hereafter cited as Cassell with paginations.

<sup>9</sup>The Journals of "Thornton Wilder 1939-1961" ed. Donald Gallup (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985) 218: hereafter cited as Thornton Wilder.

<sup>10</sup>Thornton Wilder 218.

<sup>11</sup>Thornton Wilder 218.

<sup>12</sup>Thornton Wilder 218.

<sup>13</sup>Thornton Wilder 218.

<sup>14</sup>Thornton Wilder 219.

<sup>15</sup>Rex Burbank, Thornton Wilder (Boston: Twayne Publisher, 1961) 41: hereafter cited as Burbank.

<sup>16</sup>Burbank 65.

<sup>17</sup>Burbank 114.

<sup>18</sup>Francis Fergusson, The Humane Image in Dramatic Literature (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1957) 68: hereafter cited as Fergusson.

<sup>19</sup>Fergusson 69.

<sup>20</sup>Burbank 81.

<sup>21</sup>Fergusson 53-54.

<sup>22</sup>Fergusson 54.

<sup>23</sup>Thornton Wilder 52.

<sup>24</sup>Thornton Wilder 157.

<sup>25</sup>Malcolm Goldstein, The Art of Thornton Wilder (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1967) 5: hereafter cited as Goldstein.

<sup>26</sup>Goldstein 33.

<sup>27</sup>David Castronovo, Thornton Wilder (New York: The Ungar Publishing Company, 1986) 8: hereafter cited as Castronovo.

<sup>28</sup>Fergusson 57.

<sup>29</sup>Burbank 90.

<sup>30</sup>Fergusson 67.

<sup>31</sup>Burbank 108.

<sup>32</sup>Burbank 108.

<sup>33</sup>Wilder qtd. Fergusson 54.

<sup>34</sup>Burbank 81.

<sup>35</sup>Wilder qtd. Donald Haberman, The Plays of Thornton Wilder (Middle Town Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1967) 116: hereafter cited as Haberman.

<sup>36</sup>Wilder qtd. Haberman 116.



- 37 Haberman 117.
- 38 Haberman 117.
- 39 Wilder qtd. Haberman 117.
- 40 Haberman 117.
- 41 Burbank 82.
- 42 Burbank 83.
- 43 Burbank 83.
- 44 Fergusson 57.
- 45 Haberman 121.
- 46 Haberman 121.
- 47 Burbank 98-99.
- 48 Burbank 100.
- 49 Burbank 103.
- 50 Haberman 47.
- 51 Haberman 47.
- 52 Burbank 112.

## CHAPTER 7

### CONCLUSION

On the basis of our study of Wilder's works we can draw a sketch not only of his mytho-religious vision but also of the man behind the works. We can have the portrait of an artist who possesses a multidimensional consciousness with the stamp of tremendous originality. His work reveals the personality of an American who goes all out to create an outstanding and sparkling vision of his country. Indeed Wilder is a man of many parts, writer, educationist, social worker, traveller, a government official, and a man of vast knowledge and experience. As a creative artist, he is a "dramatist, novelist, essayist, and scriptwriter"<sup>1</sup> at one and the same time. Significantly Wilder excels in almost each one of them and goes on to become the only writer to win the prestigious Pulitzer Prize, the highest American literary award for three different books and two literary modes: once for his novel, The Bridge of San Luis Rey (1927) and twice for his plays Our Town (1938) and The Skin of Our Teeth (1942). He also goes on to bag National Book Award for his novel The Eighth Day. By all intents and purposes, Wilder is a literary genius.

Endowed with a creative mind par excellence, Wilder has a unique ability to glean knowledge from a variety of sources, to absorb its essence, assimilate it in his system, and to transform it into honey to flavour his literary works. He is an alert mind, keeping the doors of perception open to receive impulses from different directions. As Donald Haberman finds, "he is an exceptionally quick observer and, as Henry James would have it, deep."<sup>2</sup> However, he does not visualise things like an

ordinary man but as a man of mytho-poetic imagination, like such American authors as Joyce Carol Oates, Walker Percy, and Carson McCullers. However, his mytho-poetic imagination possesses a humanistic and mystical vein. His humanistic vein leads him to explore diverse realms of humans, classical, religious, and modern. It enables him to cultivate humanitarian and moral values, spirituality, optimism, and interest in the past. Likewise, his mystic vein propels him to fathom the depths of Christianity as well as Existentialism in its different forms.

Obviously, Wilder's consciousness is not only multidimensional but also original. If originality means swimming against the current of contemporary literary trends, Wilder is as original as T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. As Eliot has set his massive weight against the ideological and literary tides and has made Herculean efforts to revive the Catholic Culture, Wilder also makes tremendous efforts to restore the glories of Classical Culture. Like Eliot, he confronts the tide of naturalism in America. Subsequently, he does not seek kinship with his illustrious compatriots like Theodore Dreiser, Sinclair Lewis, Upton Sinclair, John Dos Passos, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway et al.

As a creative artist, Wilder endorses Eliot's faith in collective consciousness. He identifies himself with authors who share a collective consciousness which entails a belief in the multiplicity of souls in the dead abyss of time, man's relationship with the world around, and the unity of the human spirit. It is this consciousness which enables him to realize the importance of social issues that involve despair, nihilism, isolation, and the failure of love and tradition which infect modern consciousness.

However, like Eliot, Wilder does not relinquish his roots. Like Eliot, he does not become a habitant of no-man's land. He does not feel like a person stranded in a dilapidated house groping for truth in the twilight of his pre-conceived notions. Wilder's consciousness, despite voyages in different worlds, remains deeply entrenched in his American experience. His planetary consciousness loosens its grip only to hold fast the native experience. In reality he promotes the idea of collective consciousness not for the intrinsic importance of its values but for its identity with American values. Interestingly, he makes the American life of daily experience the reservoir of the perennial human values. Wilder is convinced of the superiority of American moral values in as much as they are refreshing and enlightened without the weight of history, custom, and tradition. Naturally the vision which Wilder creates, is not planetary but of American. It is no wonder Edmund Fuller finds it as, "one of the most searching, balanced and mature visions of ourselves as Man that any American writer offers us."<sup>3</sup> It is precisely the creation of this vision which is Wilder's chief contribution to American literature. "There is no man in American," declares Archibald MacLeish, "... whose words will carry farther around the earth (than Wilder's)."<sup>4</sup>

Indeed Wilder participates in the great American movement which promotes the American Dream of phenomenal progress and unprecedented prosperity. He is devoted to exemplify American civilization as the pinnacle of human experience. This vision, which was implicit in the Pilgrimage Fathers' dream of founding a New Jerusalem in American wilderness, surfaces in its variegated colours in the writings of the Transcendentalists especially Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman. While Emerson

highlights the virtues of self-reliance and public service, Thoreau by his thought, word, and deed exemplifies the Protestant virtues of human dignity, responsibility, industriousness, and independence. At the same time, Whitman champions the cause of a democratic culture in its utmost splendour. The transcendentalist writers combine together to celebrate American life in the twentieth century. The American Dream finds one of its best expressions in the Gertrude Stein. It is this dream which inspires the mytho-religious vision of Wilder as well. It props up not only the structures of his plays and narratives but also operates as an instrument of character-delineation.

The central core of Wilder's religious vision is invariably religion and the myths, underlying his experience. Interestingly, Wilder's attitude towards religion is paradoxical. In his religious beliefs, he does not follow his contemporaries who adhere to humanistic values. "Unlike such humanists as More and T.S. Eliot, Wilder never identified himself openly with organized religion."<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, since Wilder is essentially a religious soul, he has a religion which can be defined as, "Protestantism, stripped of its sectarian colorations."<sup>6</sup> However, this Protestantism is reinforced somewhat by ethical principles of Soren Kierkegaard, atheistic proclivities of Jean-Paul Sartre, and the mystical propensities of Berdyaev. As for the myths, he is attentive to those underlying classical humanism and Christianity.

However, Wilder arrives at his mytho-religious vision rather late. He begins with rather a religious vision which is based on Protestantism, received from his family environment i.e. his family circumstances, friends circle, and school experience. His vision is interspersed with Catholic contents which go on to create a mystic streak in his consciousness. This mystic streak is further accentuated by the

infusion of Platonic Humanism. The blending of religious and Platonic elements goes a long way to inform his early plays included in The Angel That Troubled the Waters. Interestingly, all these plays are, "parables or fables teaching Platonic or Christian lessons whose subjects include faith, love, humility, sacrifice, and the role and responsibility of the artist in society. The characters, for the most part two-dimensional, act upon one or another of these qualities - or upon superstition, reason, pride, or selfishness."<sup>7</sup> The first play in the volume "Nascuntur Poetae," dramatizes Wilder's Platonic theory of art. Another play "Centaurs," embodies the mystical Platonic view of the writer and his purposes. In his later plays like "Centaurs," "And the Sea Shall Give Up Its Dead," "Leviathan" and "Child Roland to the Dark Tower Came," Platonic element is conjoined with Christian mythic elements. It is precisely this visionary structure of variegated threads received from different sources that informs his early plays and fictional works, like The Cabala, The Trumpet Shall Sound, The Bridge of San Luis Rey, The Woman of Andros, The Long Christmas Dinner, Heaven's My Destination, Our Town, and The Skin of Our Teeth etc.

With the passage of time, as Wilder comes in touch with the New-Humanism of Irving Babbitt and Paul Elmer More, his ideals suffer a significant change. He begins to pay more attention to human nature and the values of the cultural past. He becomes a little more interested in the role of environment in the development of human personality. Like the new humanists he begins to fuse New England Puritanism with classicism and renaissance. However, unlike the new humanists, he is convinced of the necessity of religion, as the foundation stone of ethical principles. On this point, Wilder is in agreement with T.S. Eliot. However, he goes on to differ

from his great contemporary on the nature of religion, required for such a foundation. He believes that there is no necessity of an institutional religion to provide validity to ethical principles. Thus Wilder's Christian Humanism becomes, "nondoctrinal and free of sectarian or ritualistic tendencies."<sup>8</sup> His humanism is further reinforced by the inclusion of the ideological and technical innovations of Proust, Americanism of Gertrude Stein, and the myth making talent of James Joyce.

His early works like The Cabala, The Bridge of San Luis Rey, and The Woman of Andros occupy an important place in his career. They are remarkable for their early mytho-religious vision. In The Cabala which marks the influence of Proust, Cabell, and James at one and the same time, Wilder recreates mythical characters in most modern terms. He provides modern denominations to mythological figures like Jupiter, Demeter, Pan, Venus and Adonis, and Mercury and show their irrelevance to modern world. They are presented as the symbols of the moral decay of the contemporary society. If in The Cabala Wilder rejects cabalistic notions, in The Bridge of San Luis Rey he goes on to reject scientific notions of the rational explanation of accidents. While exploring the themes of moral isolation and love, he goes on to ask whether events occur by accident or by design and highlights the indispensability of love in human life. In The Woman of Andros Wilder attempts to explore the elements which anticipate Christian values. Wilder creates characters like Chrysis, Pamphilus, the silent young priest of Aesculapius and Apollo who inculcate values which can be defined in only Christian terms.

In his works like The Long Christmas Dinner and Heaven's My Destination, Wilder's mytho-religious vision becomes more attuned to Americanism. In the

former, he ventures into the contemporary American world and goes on to project such themes as desire for love, the fear of rejection, and the fear of death. But its central point is to highlight the significance of the smallest events of ordinary life. In the later, Wilder endeavours to show the best and the worst in the American religious and moral traditions. Both these books celebrate American life of the eternal moral values.

However, the most remarkable exposition of the early phase of Wilder's religious vision surfaces in works like Our Town, The Skin of Our Teeth and The Matchmaker. Inspired by Gertrude Stein's Americanism, Our Town dramatizes the ordinary events in the lives of ordinary people in an almost pastoral setting and tries to find perennial moral values in the smallest events of our daily life. Symbolically presenting the life of the people of the town of Grover's Corners as the microcosm of human experience, it portrays the eternal and universal residing in the collective human mind. The Matchmaker, tries to show that, "a vigorous, robust spirit of humanism is the answer to materialism."<sup>9</sup> As Our Town is inspired by Stein, The Skin of Our Teeth is inspired by James. The play cast in an allegorical structure, goes on to dramatize Wilder's theory of the relationship between the America and destiny or, to be precise, the belief that Americans hold key to the destiny of the human race.

For all intents and purposes, Wilder's mytho-religious vision assumes its full and final form only after the inclusion of the philosophical notions of Soren Kierkegaard, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Nicholas Berdyaev. In his vision, Wilder goes on to use these ideas to reinforce his world-view which hitherto was merely a conglomeration of Protestant morality, Catholic mysticism, humanism of different



varieties the dream of the early settlers, the great Transcendentalists, and the modern writers like Gertrude Stein. Now by assimilating the central principles of Existentialism, Wilder provides more social dimensions and philosophical depth to his mytho-religious vision.

The ideas of the great existentialists inspire him to create an existentialist hero, responsive to American experience, replacing the tragic hero of the European consciousness. In The Ides of March, he not only reinterprets the historical myth in terms of Kierkegaard but also develops the character of Julius Caesar in the light of Sartre's notions of freedom and atheism and Kierkegaard's notions of dread and trembling. By yoking together the ancient myth and existentialism, Wilder shapes a mytho-religious vision of immense power and intensity which blends the spirit of antiquity with that of modernity. The Kierkegaardian elements go on to inform The Alcestiad as well. In the book Wilder weds the central elements of Christianity and Humanism with the existentialist notions of finitude and infinitude, passionate nonsense, the sublime in the pedestrian, despair as the necessary preparation to self-recognition, leap of faith etc. and Berdyaev's religious existentialism.

Wilder continues to use the Kierkegaardian elements of faith in the character delineation, especially to chart the spiritual growth of John Ashley, the protagonist of The Eighth Day. The hero represents Wilder's secular elect who are men of faith, democrats, moralists, industrious and independent persons, and spiritualists at one and the same time. Ashley is Wilder's self-portrait as well as the portrait of the Modern Man living successfully in a materialistic society without relinquishing his spiritual faith. Interestingly, Christianity remains central to Wilder's consciousness. But it is

a Christianity which as interpreted by humanism, Kierkegaard, Sartre and Berdyaev as well as Americanism. Wilder is indeed one of the greatest American minds who makes herculean efforts to validate American experience, showing that Americans cherish the same humanistic and moral values which sustained the Greek and the Christian world in ancient times. Wilder, through his works, exemplifies that the American values are superior to the ancient values in as much as they are updated, enriched, and made relevant to the complex experience of the modern world. As an embodiment of the updated values, American life can serve as a beacon light to guide the path of modern humanity. Wilder believes that it is only America which can provide hope to mankind, stranded in the wilderness of despair, disenchantment, disillusionment, and tormented by the dread of disaster and destruction.

## Chapter Notes – 7

<sup>1</sup>Contemporary Literary Criticism, Volume 35 ed. Daniel G. Marowski (Detroit, Michigan: Gale Research Company Book Tower, 1985) 435: hereafter the book cited as Contemporary Literary Criticism.

<sup>2</sup>Donald Haberman, The Plays of Thornton Wilder (Middle Town Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1967) 5: hereafter cited as Haberman.

<sup>3</sup>Edmund Fuller qtd. Rex Burbank, Thornton Wilder (Boston: Twayne Publisher, 1961) 127: hereafter cited as Burbank.

<sup>4</sup>Archibald MacLeish qtd. Burbank 127.

<sup>5</sup>Burbank 133.

<sup>6</sup>Burbank 133.

<sup>7</sup>Burbank 21-22.

<sup>8</sup>Burbank 29.

<sup>9</sup>Burbank 86.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

### PRIMARY SOURCES

Wilder, Thornton. The Trumpet Shall Sound, Yale Literary Magazine, 85: 9-26, 78-92, 128-46, 192-207 (October, November, December 1919, January 1920).

\_\_\_\_\_. The Cabala, New York: Carroll and Graf Publishers, Inc., 1987.

\_\_\_\_\_. The Bridge of San Luis Rey, New York: A. and C. Boni, Inc., 1927.

\_\_\_\_\_. The Angel That Troubled the Waters, New York: Coward, 1928.

\_\_\_\_\_. The Woman of Andros, New York A. and C. Boni, 1930.

\_\_\_\_\_. The Long Christmas Dinner and Other Plays in One Act, New York: Coward-McCann, 1931.

\_\_\_\_\_. Heaven's My Destination, New York: Penguin Books, 1935.

\_\_\_\_\_. The Ides of March, New York: Grosset and Dunlap Publisher, 1948.

\_\_\_\_\_. Three Plays: Our Town, The Skin of Our Teeth, The Matchmaker, New York: Harper and Row, 1957.

\_\_\_\_\_. The Eighth Day, New York: Harper, 1967.

\_\_\_\_\_. Theophilus North, New York: Harper, 1973.

\_\_\_\_\_. The Alcestiad, New York: Harper, 1977.

## SECONDARY SOURCES

Adcock, St. John, "Thornton Wilder," Bookman, 69:316-19 (March 1929).

Balliett, Carl, Jr. "The Skin of Whose Teeth?" Part III, Saturday Review of Literature, 26: 11 (January 2, 1943).

Brown, E.K. "A Christian Humanist," University of Toronto Quarterly, 4:356-70 (April 1935).

Brown, John Mason. "Wilder: Our Town," Saturday Review of Literature, 32:34 (August 6, 1949).

Burbank, Rex, Thornton Wilder, Boston: Twayne, 1961.

Campbell, Joseph and H. M. Robinson. "The Skin of Whose Teeth?" Saturday Review of Literature, 25:3-4 (December 19, 1942), 26:16-18 (February 13, 1948).

Corrigan, Robert W. "Thornton Wilder and the Tragic Sense of Life." Educational Theatre, 13: 167 -73 (October 1961).

Cowley, Malcolm. Exile's Return. New York: Viking, 1951.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Introduction," A Thornton Wilder Trio. New York: Criterion, 1956.

\_\_\_\_\_. ed. Writers at Work: The Paris Review Interviews. New York: Viking, 1958.

- Davis, Elmer. "Caesar's Last Months," Saturday Review of Literature, 31:11-12  
(February 21, 1948).
- Edgell, D. P. "Thornton Wilder Revisited," Cairo Studies in English: 2:47-59  
(1960).
- Fergusson, Francis. "Three Allegorists: Brecht, Wilder, and Eliot," Sewanee  
Review, 64:544-73 (Fall 1956).
- \_\_\_\_\_. The Human Image in Dramatic Literature, Doubleday, 1957.
- Firebaugh, Joseph J. "The Humanism of Thornton Wilder," Pacific Spectator,  
4:426-28 (Fall 1950).
- French, Warren. A Vast Landscape: Time in the Novels of Thornton Wilder,  
edited by Mary Ellen Williams, Idaho State University Press, 1979.
- Fuller, Edmund, "Thornton Wilder: The Notation of a Heart," American Scholar,  
28:210-17 (Spring 1959).
- Fulton, A. R., "Expressionism Twenty Years After," Sewanee Review, 52:398-  
413 (Summer 1944).
- Gassner, John. Form an Idea in the Modern Theatre. New York: Dryden, 1956.
- Gilder, Rosamond, "Broadway in Review," Theatre Arts, 27:9-11 (January 1943).
- Goldstein, Malcolm. The Art of Thornton Wilder, University of Nebraska Press,  
1965.

- Gold, Michael. "Wilder: Prophet of the Genteel Christ," New Republic, 64:266-67  
(October 22, 1930).
- Goldstone, Richard H., Thornton Wilder: An Intimate Portrait, Dutton, 1975.
- Grebanier, Bernard. Thornton Wilder, University of Minnesota Press, 1964.
- Guthrie, Tyrone. "The World of Thornton Wilder," Now York Times Magazine,  
November 27, 1955.
- Haberman, Donald. The Plays of Thornton Wilder, Wesleyan University Press,  
1967.
- Hansen, Harry. "Three Reviews," Woman's Radio Review, 1935.
- Harrison, Gilbert A. The Enthusiast: A Life of Thornton Wilder, Ticknor and  
Fields, 1983.
- Hewitt, Bernard. "Thornton Wilder Says 'Yes'," Tulane Drama Review, 4:110-20  
December 1959).
- Hopper, Stanley R. Ed. Spiritual Problems in Contemporary Literature. New  
York: Institute for Religious and Social Studies, 1952.
- Kuner, M.C. Thornton Wilder: The Bright and the Dark, Crowell, 1972..
- MacLeish, Archibald. "The Isolation of the American Artist," Atlantic Monthly,  
201:55-59 (January 1958).

McNamara, Robert, "Phases of American Religion in Thornton Wilder and Willa Cather," Catholic World, 135:641-49 (September 1932).

\_\_\_\_\_. "An Obliging Man," Time, 61 :44-49 (January 12, 1953).

Papajewski, Helmut. Thornton Wilder, translated by John Conway, Unger, 1969.

Parmenter, Ross. "Novelist into Playwright," Saturday Review of Literature, 18: 10-11 (June 11, 1938).

Saltpeter, Harry. "Why Is a Best Seller?" Outlook, 148:643 (April 18, 1928).

Scott, Winfield Townley. "Our Town and the Golden Veil," Virginia Quarterly, 29:103-17 (January 1953)..

Simon, Linda. Thornton Wilder: His World, Doubleday, 1979.

Smith, Harrison. "The Skin of Whose Teeth:" Part II, Saturday Review of Literature, 25: 12 (December 26, 1942).

Stresau, Herman. Thornton Wilder, translated by Frieda Schultze, Unger, 1971.

Wilder, Amos Niven. Thornton Wilder and His Public, Fortress, 1980.

